

AFTER THE BATTLE



LIBYA—TOBRUK REVISITED

RELIQS OF THE RANGE

THE NOTORIOUS FORT BREENDONK

MISSING NORMANDY TYPHOON

Number 51

AFTER THE BATTLE

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Published by Battle of Britain Prints International Ltd.,
Church House, Church Street,
London E15 3JA, England
Telephone: 081-534 8833
Fax: 081-555 7567

Printed in Great Britain by
Plaistow Press Ltd., London E15 3JA

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After the Battle is published quarterly on the 15th of February, May, August and November.

United Kingdom Newsagent Distribution:

Seymour Press Ltd., Windsor House, 1270 London Road, Norbury, London SW16 4DH. Telephone: 081-679 1899

United States Distribution and Subscriptions:

Bill Dean Books Ltd., P.O. Box 69, Whitestone, New York 11357. Telephone: 1-718-359-6969

Canadian Distribution and Subscriptions:

Vanwell Publishing Ltd., 1 Northrup Crescent, St. Catharines, Ontario, L2M 6P5. Telephone: (416) 937 3100

Australian Distribution:

Technical Book and Magazine Company, Pty. Ltd., 289-299 Swanston Street, Melbourne, Victoria, 3000. Telephone: 663 3951

New Zealand Distribution:

South Pacific Books (Imports) Ltd., 6 King Street, Grey Lynn, Auckland 2. Telephone: 762-142

Italian Distribution:

Tuttostoria, Casella Postale 395, I-43100 Parma. Telephone: 521 94702, Telex 532274 EDIALB I

Dutch Language Edition:

Quo Vadis, Postbus 3121, 3760 DC Soest.

CONTENTS

LIBYA

- The Desert Rescue Team 1
- Tobruk Revisited 8

WRECK RECOVERY

- Normandy Typhoon 20

CRIME IN WWII

- The Notorious Fort Breendonk 28

PRESERVATION

- Relics of the Range 40

READERS' INVESTIGATIONS

- Wimpey Investigation 44

IT HAPPENED HERE

- The Road Ends at Denée 46

Front Cover: Relics on the range. Churchill unearthed from Battlesbury Bowl on Salisbury Plain in August 1985. (Steve Casely)

Centre pages: Aftermath of the fighting around Tobruk. Looking north-east towards the town, this ordnance dump lies inside the old perimeter defences. (Vasko Barbic)

Back Cover: In memory of all French tank crews killed during the war. The Renault B1 bis was the principal French medium tank of the Bataillons de Chars de Combat in 1940. This actual tank, preserved at Mourmelon south-east of Reims, was rebuilt from the wrecks of B1s used by the German army and is named after Général Estienne, founder of the French tank corps in the First World War. (Jean Paul Pallud)

Acknowledgements: The Editor is very grateful to Major John Richardson, Major John Gillman and Mike Hofman for providing facilities to visit and photograph the Relics of the Range, and to Monsieur R. Avignon, J. L. Roba and J. Léotard for assistance rendered during the research for our feature on the battle at Denée. Our appreciation also to Squadron Leader A. P. Zeleny for his generous help during the preparation of the chapter on the Desert Rescue Team; likewise to Ken Rimell and Jean-Pierre Benamou for the article on the Normandy Typhoon.

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ISSN: 0306-154X

Libya, part of the Ottoman Empire from the 16th century, was invaded by Italy in 1911, continuing under tenuous occupation throughout the First World War. Italy attempted to come to terms with nationalistic forces in the country by negotiation but, when these efforts foundered, and with the emergence of the Fascist dictatorship of Mussolini in 1922, a new policy of total colonisation through force was begun. The coastal area of Tripolitania was subdued within months but resistance continued in Cyrenaica in the eastern part of the country until 1931 when the Sanusi leader, Omar al-Mukhtar, was captured and executed.

Benito Mussolini launched his 'demographic colonisation' programme in 1935 and by the outbreak of the Second World War 18 per cent (150,000) of the total population of Libya were Italian emigrants. By the end of the see-saw battles of World War II across Cyrenaica, which changed hands three times,

all the Italian settlers had been evacuated and the British government pledged that the Sanusi, who had aided the Allies, would be permanently freed from Italian rule after the war. Negotiations were long and protracted, a variety of solutions being put forward for the future governing of the impoverished country until the United Nations General Assembly

decreed in 1949 that Libya should become an independent country by 1952. A constitution was drawn up and the head of the Sanusi, Muhammad Idris al-Mahdi as-Sanusi, chosen as the first king. Discovery of

oil in 1959 inexorably changed the economic status of the country which would no longer be reliant on income from aid and the rent of military bases to Britain and the United States. Ten years later, on September 1, 1969, a group of young army officers led by Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi deposed King Idris and declared a republic, expelling British and American forces from the country.

LIBYA



The triumphal arch built astride the coastal road just west of El Agheila by Mussolini as a symbol of the Italian colonisation of the country. Its name is a legacy of the Desert campaign and the British soldiers' love of naming features after places back home, fully expressed in North Africa. There was Knightsbridge (south-west of Tobruk) and King's Cross; Piccadilly Circus, complete with its Eros made out of petrol cans, south of Sidi Barrani; Charing Cross at Mersa Matruh and of course Marble Arch. This picture was taken by Squadron Leader Zeleny in 1965 when even the nearby airfield had the same name.



With the banishing of British forces from Libya in 1970 came the demise of the RAF Desert Rescue Team based at El Adem, just south of Tobruk. Its last CO, also commanding officer of the Desert Survival School, was Flight Lieutenant (later Squadron Leader) Adolf 'Zeke' Zeleny. From 1934 he served as a regular officer in the Czechoslovakian Army from where he led the escape of six officers to Poland in 1939. After brief service with the French Foreign Legion later the same year, he came to Britain with the Czech Army-in-Exile. From 1941-45 he flew operationally with RAF Bomber and Coastal Commands. While in Libya in the 1960s he organised and led at least ten expeditions into the interior and so had the unique opportunity to explore the desert and to report on the remains then still existing from the conflict which had swung back and forth over one of the world's most inhospitable regions. The most significant

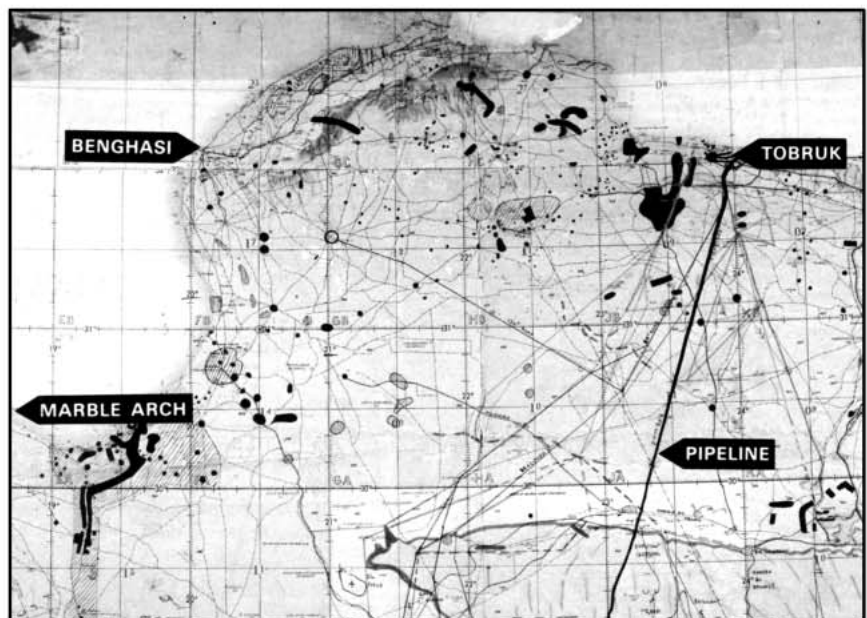
recovery concluded by his team was the removal of the No. 2 engine from the B-24 Liberator 'Lady Be Good' (see After the Battle No. 25) and other artifacts from the crash site in 1968 for subsequent restoration and display in the US Air Force Museum in Ohio. It was during a later expedition — Exercise Uweinat in August-September 1969 — that Zeke was thrown off the back of the Land-Rover he was guiding, breaking his ankle in five places. The team planned to use the 'Lady Be Good' as navigational landmark — this picture shows Zeke on crutches on the left. Back Row: SAC Lindsay, Sergeant Scott, Corporal Lawrence, 2nd Lieutenant Gee, Corporal Pelling, SAC Yale, Trooper Parkinson, Corporal Lloyd, Squadron Leader Lane. Front Row: Flight Lieutenant Zeleny, Squadron Leader Smith, SAC Hodges, SAC Shearer, JT Smith, Private Ditchett, CFN Wright, 2nd Lieutenant Roxburgh.

The Desert Rescue Team

Exercise Uweinat was the last major operation to be conducted by the Desert Rescue Team — the revolution actually taking place while the team were in the desert. The official report of the trip makes fascinating reading and the Editor is indebted to 'Zeke' Zeleny for permission to quote the following extracts:

In accordance with the Near East Air Force Search and Rescue (SAR) Standing Orders, the forces should be exercised at least once a year. The wreck of the Liberator *Lady Be Good* offers an excellent setting for a major or minor SAR exercise, as it lies off an airway in a difficult part of the desert, but which would allow a realistic deployment of most SAR forces and an air evacuation from the site. A DRT exercise in this area was envisaged to take place in the Autumn 1969 by the OC DRT. The aim of the exercise was:

- a. To train the DRT in desert driving, sand sea crossing, navigation and location or target.
- b. To replace aviation and MT fuel in the SAR fuel dump at Kufra.
- c. To compare the performance of the radio sets GR 410 and C 11.
- d. To position special sand movement test stakes for the British Libyan Expedition, 1970, in the dunes near Jebel Archenu, 2218N 2446E.
- e. To collect samples of rock and snails for the British Museum.
- f. To compare the performance of DRT Land-Rovers (4 cylinder engine) with a private Land-Rover (6 cylinder engine).
- g. To test the Rediffon PC 2 Radio.

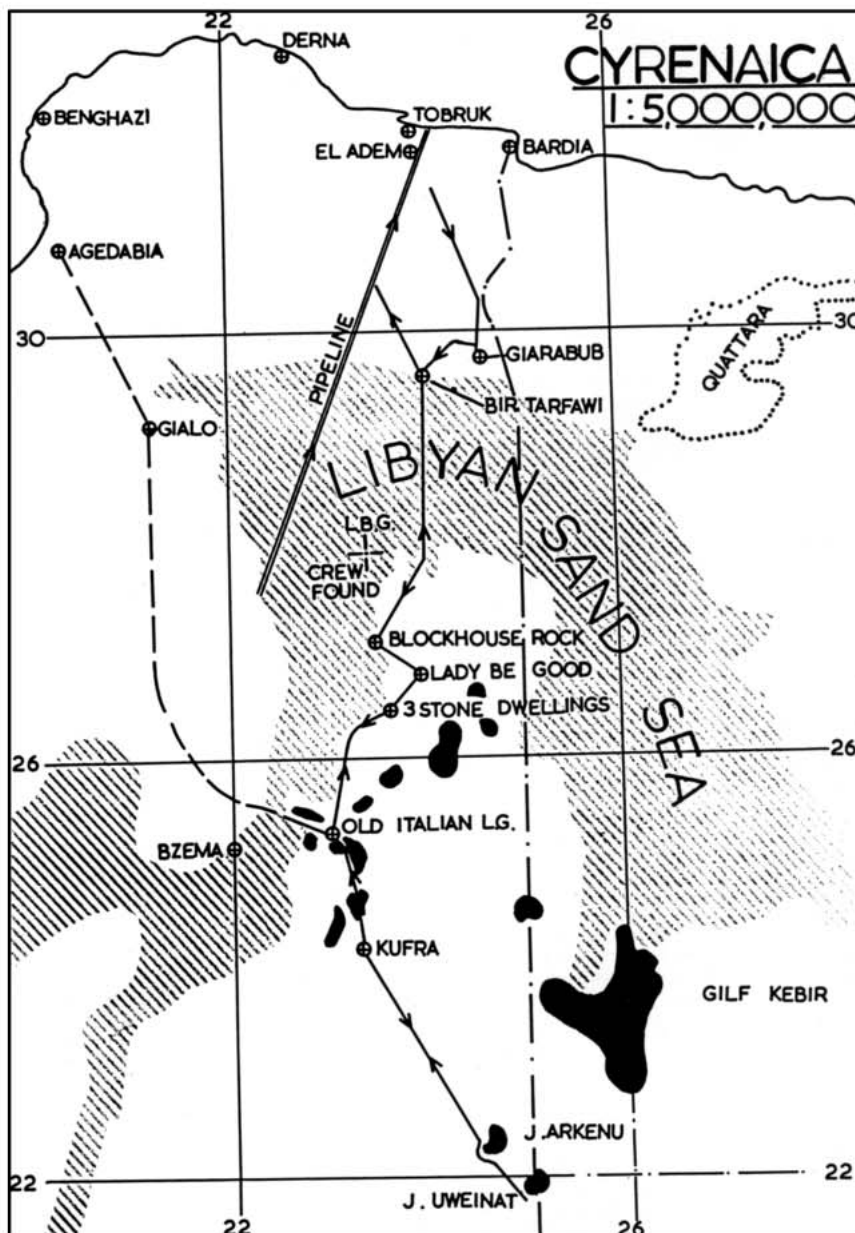


Reproduction of a battered map of part of Libya used by Zeke during his expeditions. Each black blob denotes an uncleared minefield; the compass courses of many journeys criss-cross the desert area. The post-war pipeline running south from Tobruk to the old BP Serir oil field was a useful landmark in an area largely devoid of identifiable features as a maintenance track ran alongside the buried pipe. The spellings of many North African place names vary enormously as cartographers have struggled to come to terms with the original Arabic. Some pronunciations cannot be transcribed into the Roman alphabet — for example Colonel al-Qaddafi is usually spelt Gaddafi in an attempt to simulate a sound non-existent in English. The 'Tobrukh' of the Second World War is now more usually seen as 'Tobruk' but spelt as 'Tubruq' on modern maps.

Saturday, August 23, 1969. All vehicles serviceable. Check of the equipment, and adjustment of loads. The DRT departed at 1100Z by road for Giarabub, where the Team arrived at 1445Z. The Leader reported to the Police Station and clearance was obtained. At 1500Z the DRT set off by track for Bir Et Tarfawi. Difficulties experienced at 'Mine-field Rock', where there is a difficult passage through a sandbank flanked by active mine-fields. After 30 minutes struggle, the obstacle was overcome . . .

Sunday, August 24, 1969. Early reveille and left camp at sunrise for Bir Et Tarfawi (2935N 2403E). There the tyres were deflated to sand driving pressures. The Petrified Forest was visited. At 0600Z a general southerly course was set into the Sand Sea. The going was fairly easy for the first hour. After 0700Z it was necessary to cross the dunes, and the going became more difficult, and vehicles started to bog down, particularly the heavy 3-Tonners. But after one hour of difficult going an easy, flat sand sheet was encountered and the going improved, though vehicles bogged down occasionally for a short period, and by midday good progress had been made. At 1235 the Leader was thrown from his Land-Rover and hurt his ankle. The damage was assessed as torn ligaments, and it was decided to carry on.

Monday, August 25, 1969. Normal reveille and at 0445Z the Team left the camp on heading due South. The going became easy and soon the dunes widened. By 0615Z the Team was abreast of the last dune. A halt was made there and the tyres of all vehicles were pumped up to track/desert pressures. The Navigator took a sunshot. A heading of 208 was set for Blockhouse Rock (2702N 2333E). A puncture delayed the Team slightly. At midday, and on ETA, the Team stopped and a visual search was made, and a conference held as there was a difference of opinion. The sunshot intimated that we were west of the Rock, and that concurred with the opinion of the Leader. An irregular search was made to East, North and West and still no Rock! The visibility became poor due to the heat haze and numerous mirages, and with the temperature having risen to 100F it was decided to rest until later. Another conference was held between the Leader and Navigator and a couple of sun sights taken, and a MPP (Most Probable Position) worked out. This indicated that the DRT should be 5 miles north of the rock. A southerly heading was set at 1500Z and after 7 miles the Team stopped. The edge of the Sand Sea was observed to the West. The Leader went on a recce in that direction and the Rock was located by 1600Z. The camp was made near to the rock.



Exercise Uweinat. Once having crossed the Sand Sea, the landmark to head for was Blockhouse Rock (*below*) — a quite incredible freak of nature.



Blockhouse Rock lies on the edge of the 'Lady Be Good' basin, a roughly circular area of 100 miles in diameter bordered by the Sand Sea on the east, north and west and in the south by the

nameless group of mountains which isolate it from the Kufra plain. The rock itself is a haven for migrating birds and snakes, being guarded by a resident hawk.



Kufra — one of the magic names of the desert. The oasis was captured from the Italians (who had occupied it since 1931) by Free French under General LeClerc with the help of the Long Range Desert Group who thereafter made it the centre of LRDG activity. In former days it had been the seat of the Sanusi Religious Empire which comprised West Sudan, Chad and French Niger (as it was). The French, to whom this area was allocated in the partition of Africa agreement made in London in 1898/99, started to penetrate the area there from Algiers, although the first European to reach Kufra had been Dr. Rohlfs in 1879.

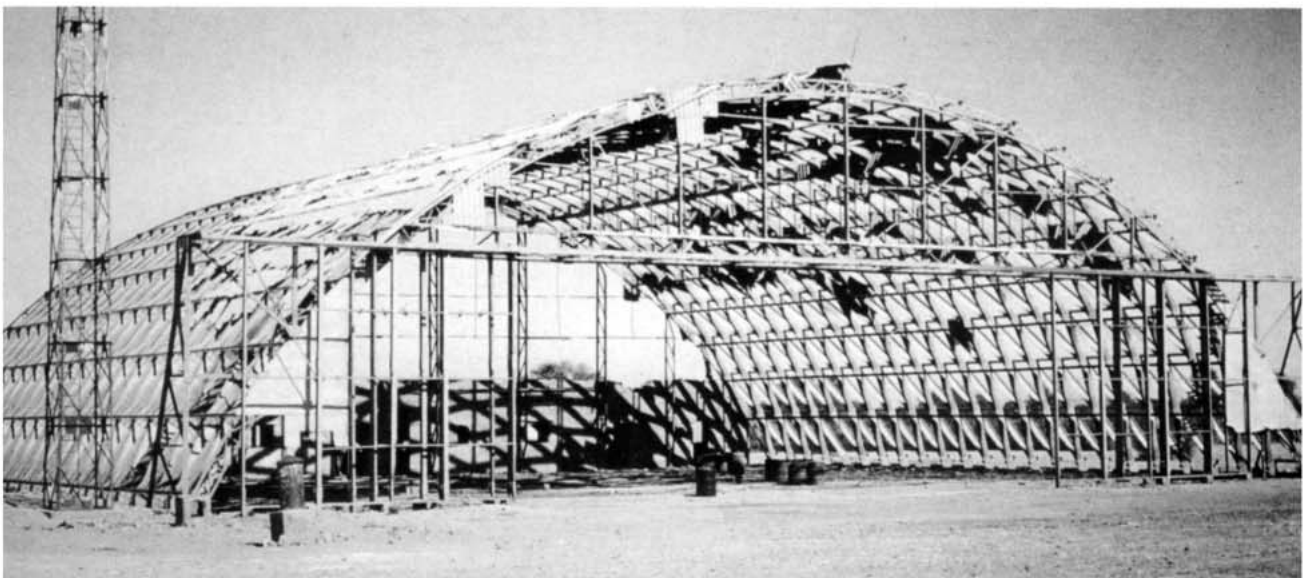
Tuesday, August 26, 1969. Reveille at 0330Z. Radio contact was made with Base at 0424Z, message passed 'Position 2702N 2332E. Departing for *Lady Be Good* now'. On ETA 0600Z a halt was called and a briefing held on Search Procedure. The pattern selected, was line abreast, with search distance between vehicles of $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ miles, according to terrain, the Deputy Leader leading on the Eastern Heading, and the rest of the Team spaced south, the Leader being on the right wing. Unfortunately the Deputy set off before the rest of the Team could take up position, and a rather broken line ensued, the wing vehicle having to race at top speed. Fortunately the wreck of the aircraft was soon sighted and the Team converged on it, arriving there at 0645Z. The runway which the DRT built and marked out in April 1968 was still visible, though the markers were silted up. At 0815Z a message was passed to El

Adem: 'Position *Lady Be Good*. Do you want us to stay here for SAR exercise or carry on?' El Adem replied at 0830Z 'Answer to message carry on'. At 0900Z the Team left *Lady Be Good* heading for 3 Stone Dwellings 2616N 2336E. The terrain continued flat and easy, and at 1130Z the edge of the Sand Sea was reached. The ground became stonier, and shallow wadis scored the surface. Odd defunct clumps of vegetation decorated the bed of the non-existent river. Suddenly a well used track appeared leading westwards where a derelict oil camp attracted attention and was inspected. A few items were collected — 'which may be handy sometime' — such as parts of a Bedford. Eventually the Dwellings were found in a shallow wadi, gawped at, and well photographed. The reason for their existence and age is obscure. From there, the rutted, dusty, multiple track which skirted the southern edge of the Sand Sea was followed. Some

derelict wartime vehicles, probably belonging to the LRDG, were bypassed. As suddenly as the track had appeared from nowhere, so it disappeared for no reason alongside three conical hills, and so the Team was back to following the edge of the Sand Sea

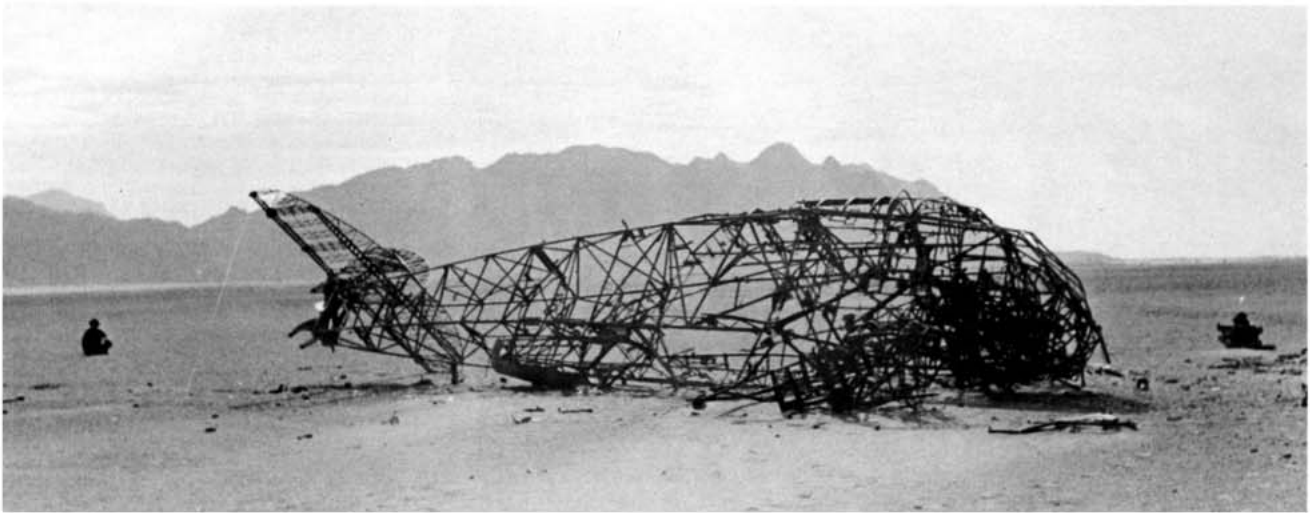
Wednesday, August 27, 1969. Woke up late as alarm clock failed and started off at 0520Z on a due South heading, passing through an undulating sand sheet. After 10 miles, the course was altered to 170. A range of black hills appeared about 20 miles away in a SSE direction, and then another outcrop of flat hills (Jebel El Gardeba) could be discerned to the SSW. The going was good on the sand/pebble surface. At 0730Z a different type of country was reached, the dunes intermingling with clinker hillocks, causing 'rough riding'. Ahead loomed a low barrier of further hills, but again a track appeared from 'nowhere'. A halt was called to inflate tyres up to track pressure, and then the journey was continued by following the 'road' through clinker strewn hills and through a pass (2518N 2304E) which was reached at 0920Z. Beyond the pass the terrain levelled out again into a sand sheet and the track disappeared. This sheet of sand formed an almost circular pan fringed on the distant horizon by conical hills. The heading of 260 was followed and at 1000Z the Team arrived at a derelict Italian airfield (2513N 2252E). Nearby the well marked and well used road to Kufra led southwards through the conical hills of Jebel El Hauaish. Tyres were deflated to sand conditions.

The character and the contour of the country changed, and the orange colour of the sand and hills announced the vicinity of Kufra. Soon the striking mountain, Hawaria (2428N 2305E) came into view and then the picturesque Lantern Hill (2425N 2312E). Here misfortune struck the Team. One vehicle struck a series of invisible hard dunelettes resembling wave ripples, but solid, causing the first vehicle, a Land-Rover, to become airborne, and sending it bouncing like a ball into the air. The 3-Ton Bedford, which had struck the ripples at the same time, followed suit, and was also airborne. In this incident Squadron Leader Smith injured his back, and it was feared at first that his spine might have been damaged. First aid was administered and he was transferred on a stretcher into the ambulance. The Team left at slow speed for Kufra, passing through the Oasis of Hawarai, and arrived at the Taj (the Fortress) at 1800Z in darkness. The ambulance was sent ahead to the hospital, and the rest of the Team drove to the derelict hangar on the airfield.



The Italians garrisoned the oasis and laid out an airstrip there in 1936, their derelict hangar being used by the DRT as their camp

site. The Team had already built a new runway in 1967 and the Occidental Oil Company ('Oxy' Camp) marked out another.



There have been many rumours of derelict Italian, German and Allied aircraft in the desert and people often assume that because of its inaccessibility the area abounds in knocked out armour. We therefore asked Squadron Leader Zeleny what actually remains to be seen, bearing in mind that his information dates from the period when he led the DRT. (There is no possibility of visiting the area today.) 'The desert was cleared of anything valuable by adventure scrap metal dealers, locals etc,' writes Zeke, 'so that not even a nut and bolt is to be found! No doubt there is a possibility of items being uncovered

after a sandstorm but I believe nothing spectacular. Uweinat, being on the borders of Libya, Egypt and the Sudan, had a useful strategic potential for the Italians, who had two airfields there. Most important, however, was the fact that it had water. 'R' Patrol went to Kufra in November 1940 to mine the road, and they found on the western landing ground two Savoia-Marchetti SM 79 bombers (which the Regia Aeronautica called the Sparviero or Hawk), 8,000 gallons of petrol and, further away, three tons of aircraft bombs. They destroyed the lot, and the remains of the Savoias lie there to this day.'

Thursday, August 28, 1969. The Leader and Squadron Leader Smith went to hospital for treatment where it was diagnosed that Squadron Leader Smith's back was badly bruised, and the Leader's leg had a suspected torn ligament — this was the opinion of the two Libyan doctors, one Russian trained, and one Viennese trained.

Friday, August 29, 1969. Early start from Kufra. Soft ground encountered beyond the boundary of the airfield. Then good going on flat, firm sand. . . . After 100 miles the ground became uneven and undulating. Four areas of dunes at right angles to the route encountered between 60 miles to 30 miles from Uweinat. From Jebel Arkenu a derelict truck was found, possibly LRDG or Italian, with bullet holes.

Saturday, August 30, 1969. Departure at 0500Z. . . . The Jebel was visible from 30 miles. Tyres were re-inflated by an old LRDG truck within sight of the Wadi Ibrahim (NW corner of Uweinat) and the Libyan Police Post of Ain Zweia (2152N 2448E). The Libyan Police sergeant accompanied the section to Ain Doua (called Ain Kasseet by the Libyans (2149N 2452E)) where there was water, the remnants of an Italian Camp, the rock paintings (of which the Libyans had no knowledge) and an Italian grave.

Sunday, August 31, 1969. Uweinat. After an organised search some quite extensive rock paintings were found, but not up to the quality of those at Ain Kasseet. The remains of an Italian aircraft SM 79g were found and plotted. After that the party departed north to Ain Mur in Arkenu. A terrain of rocky boulders stopped the vehicles one by one 4½ miles up Wadi Ain Mur. A party of three proceeded on foot for a 4 mile sortie. The well was found to be dry. . . .

Monday, September 1, 1969. Start at 0500Z following the previous route, and arrived at Kufra by 0910Z. . . . After lunch news came from the 'Oxy' Camp that all flying over Libya is prohibited, and did we know why? Later the same informer came back again to say that there had been a Revolution by the Army and that the King was dethroned. A hasty conference was called and it was decided to leave unobtrusively, but immediately. . . . An attempt to contact El Adem by radio failed. The watering party reported everything quiet in the police barracks, but whilst reloading

the vehicles it was noticed that the police party in the hangar had already been issued with rifles.

Tuesday, September 2, 1969. Reveille 0130Z. The Team left camp at 0300Z in darkness, but the track was intercepted and followed and good progress made. By 0600Z the old Italian airfield was reached (2513N 2252E). From there the old tracks were discovered and followed as far as the Pass (2518N 2304E) where they petered out. . . .

Wednesday, September 3, 1969. Late Reveille — broke camp at 0600Z backtracking to *Lady Be Good* where arrived at 0700Z. After excellent going stopped for group photographs and to search for lost pair of binoculars which were found. Then the Team drove off due north towards the Sand Sea and at 1100Z picked up the old tracks again, which were exceptionally clear — even in the sand.

Thursday, September 4, 1969. Set off at 0500Z on course due north and still following

the old tracks. Going good. Reached the old oil camp in position 2914N 2405E. Retraced the old tracks and arrived at Bir Et Tarfawi (2936N 2402E) at 1200Z. The tyres were re-filled and after a short pause a course 330 was set towards the pipeline. . . . After a bumpy journey, under reduced speed, the pipe was intercepted at kilometre 166 (103 miles) from Tobruk at 1500Z. A camp site was selected a few miles off, in a shallow wadi. Position 3028N 2331E. Message to El Adem 1900Z: 'Position 3028N 2330E. ETA El Adem 05 1000Z'.

Friday, September 5, 1969. Departed at 0500Z and followed the pipeline. Near to the pumping station (3124N 2352E) it was decided to by-pass it and keep out of sight in case of it being guarded. Beyond the station an army vehicle was observed, at first driving towards the Team, but it changed course and made off into the desert at full speed. At 0945Z the El Adem — Giarabub road was intercepted, and El Adem reached at 1005Z.



When the DRT reached the wrecks in August 1969 they found the two aircraft 1½ miles apart, some 4½ miles from Ain Zweia.



One historic spot visited by the DRT in 1967 was Jebel Sharif (south-west of Kufra), the scene of the Italian ambush of the Long Range Desert Group in February 1941. 'The Patrol lost four trucks when attacked by an Italian Auto-Saharan Company and four aircraft while camped in a small valley. Three trucks were blown up and three Italian prisoners held by the Patrol killed. (Two of the graves were found by the Team marked with crosses.) Some members of the patrol managed to get away but four men — Trooper Ronald Moore, Guardsmen John Easton and Alex Winchester, and Private Alf Tighe — were left behind, the others being convinced that they must either have been killed or made prisoner. In fact all four were alive although injured. The story of their epic march across the desert was broadcast from Cairo two months later and published in Scots Guards Regimental Orders in London on April 17, 1941:

'These four had in reality escaped to the nearby hills, where they hid to avoid capture by the enemy. Moore, a trooper of the New Zealand cavalry, was wounded in the foot. Of the two Guardsmen, Easton and Winchester, one, Easton, had a bullet wound in the throat which caused great pain. The fourth member of the party, an ordnance fitter name Tighe, was suffering from a former internal injury.

'On the following morning, the first of February, the enemy had gone. Having discovered among the burnt-out wreckage one two-gallon tin of water, but unfortunately no food whatever, our four men were faced with two alternatives. They could walk the — to them — comparatively short distance of eighty miles north-eastwards to Kufra and give themselves up to the Italians, as indeed they could well have done on the spot the day before, or retain their freedom at the expense of almost certain death, by attempting to walk two hundred and ninety miles following the car tracks along the way they had come, with the slender chance that they might be picked up by some Free French party. Rather than give in, they chose the latter course.

'Under the implicit leadership of Moore they set out on their incredible march, carrying in turn the precious tin of water. That day, an Italian aircraft flew over them but apparently did not see them.

A forgotten relic of the desert war photographed by Zeke Zeleny in April 1967. A patrol of the LRDG was ambushed in this valley at Jebel Sharif in February 1941.

'On the third day, they found a two-pound pot of plum jam, dropped off one of the trucks on the journey northward. They ate the whole of it that day. On the fourth day Tighe became very tired and on the fifth eventually persuaded his comrades to leave him and to go on, as he felt he was hindering their progress. Before going, they poured his share of the tiny water supply into a bottle which they had picked up. Not till after they had left him did this unfortunate man discover that the bottle had contained some salty substance which made the water undrinkable.

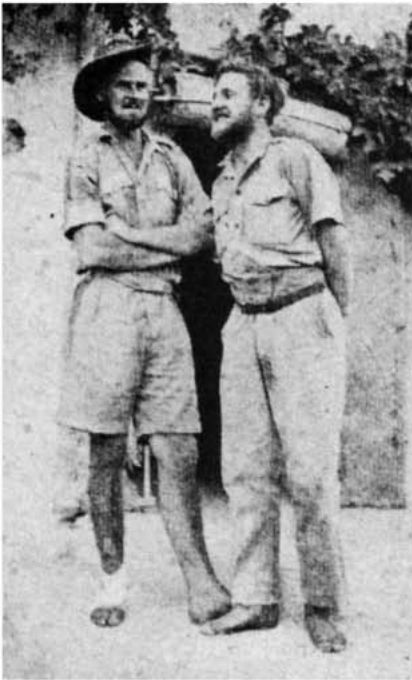
'On the sixth day a violent sand-storm

arose, but Moore, Easton and Winchester just managed to follow the fast-disappearing car tracks to Sarra. Here they spent some time in a ruined hut. They found no food, but with some motor oil which had been abandoned they managed to bathe their feet, and to make a fire to warm themselves at night. They had walked one hundred and thirty miles.

'The next morning, they continued on towards Tekro, still one hundred and sixty miles distant. By now, the motor tracks had entirely disappeared over long stretches of the route, so that great difficulty was experienced in following them up. Meanwhile Tighe, who



Almost as if it had happened yesterday, the DRT found the wrecked trucks still lying where they had been knocked out over twenty-five years previously.



Left: Trooper Ron Moore, his foot bandaged from his shrapnel wound, with Private Alf Tighe who, after he persuaded the others to leave him, was rescued at Sarra but somehow missed by the four soldiers. **Above:** The DRT halt at Ma'tan Bisharah, a well on the route to Sarra but some how missed by the four soldiers. The sun-bleached bones which lie all around are forceable reminders of the perils of desert travel.

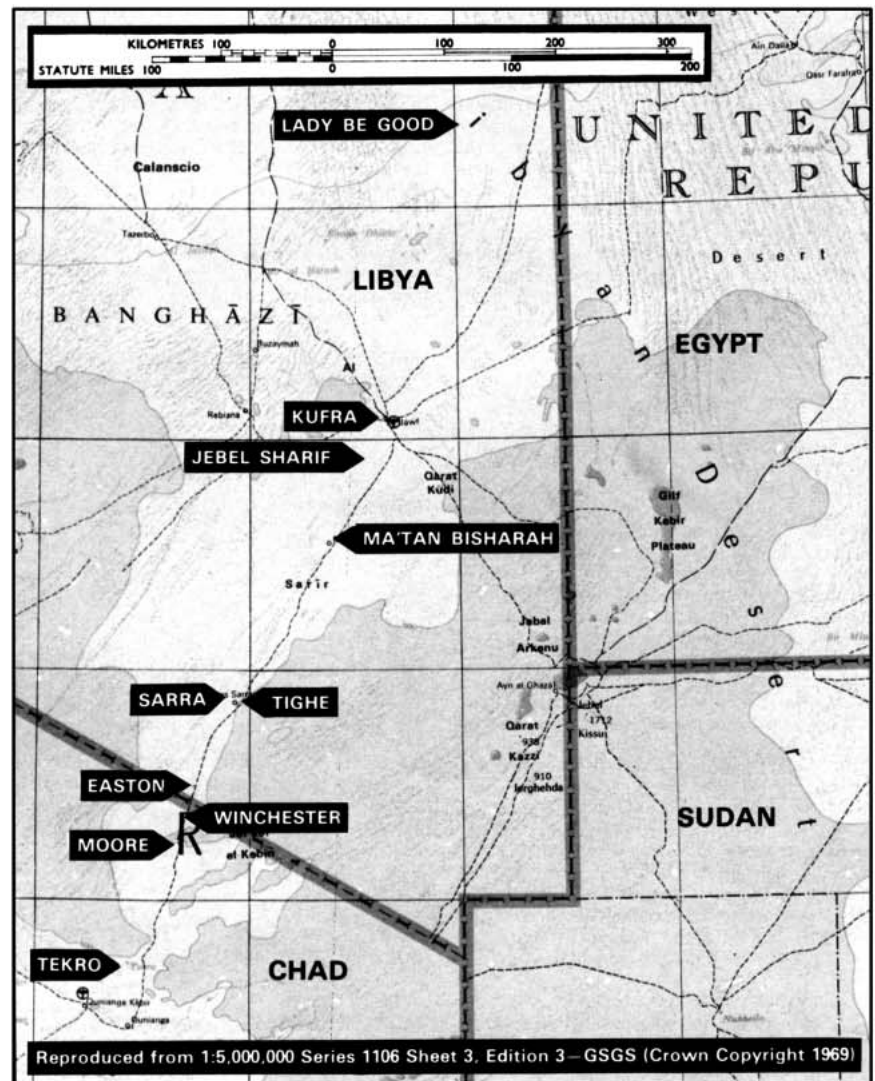
had struggled on through all that seventh day, managed to reach the hut by nightfall, but was too exhausted to go further. He found one match in the sand, and with this and the oil made a fire without which he would probably have died that night.

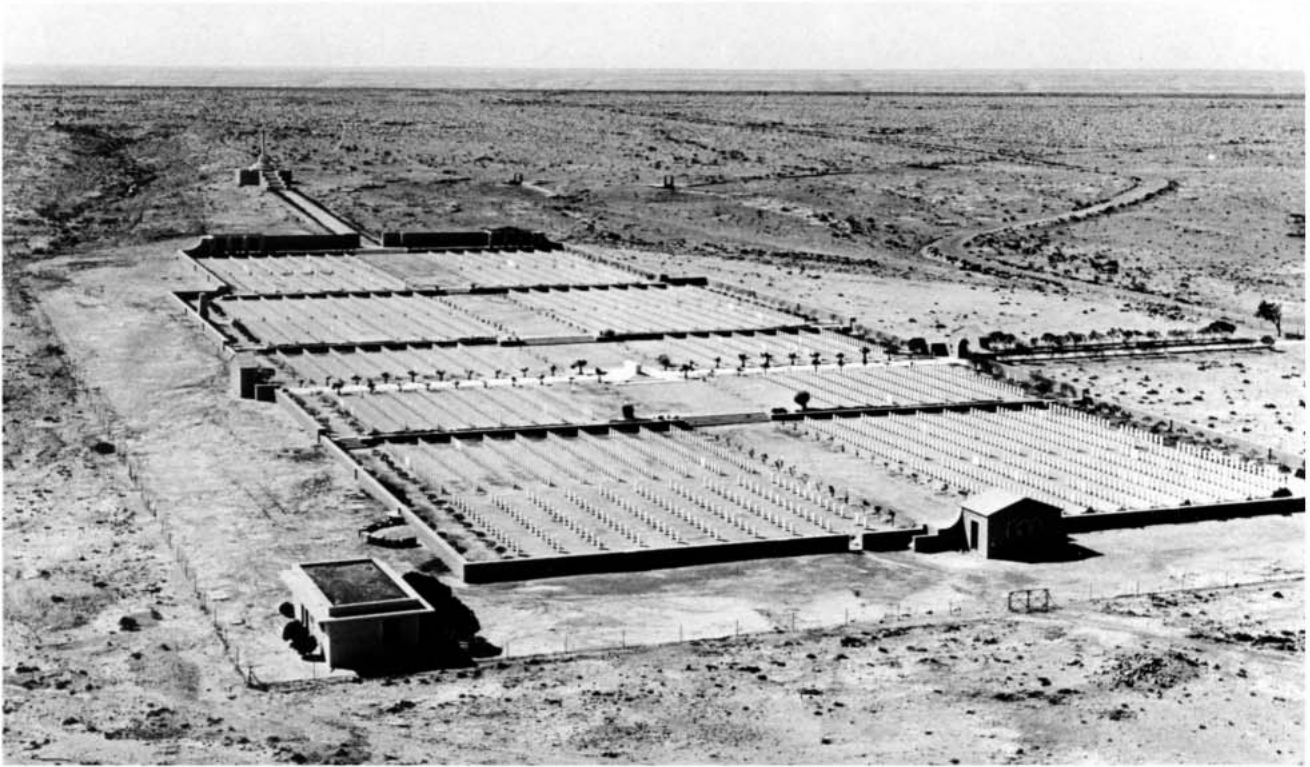
'On the evening of the ninth day, a French Patrol, fresh from a reconnaissance of the enemy position at Kufra, found Tighe at Sarra. He was still conscious and, although he had been alone and without water for four days and consequently was in a dreadful condition of nerves and exhaustion, his first thought was to explain that his three companions were ahead of him. A search party was at once organised by the French but was unsuccessful in following the track in the dark. The same day, two French aircraft spotted Moore and Winchester. By now, all water had given out and Easton was lagging behind. The aircraft dropped food and a bottle of lemonade — all they had with them — but the food neither Moore nor Winchester noticed and the cork came out of the lemonade bottle on impact with the ground, so that only half an inch of liquid remained. After this, the two men went on independently, Moore ahead, and poor Winchester, semi-delirious, struggling after him.

'Finally, on the tenth day, another search party found first Easton about fifty-five miles south of Sarra and then Winchester twelve miles further on. Both could walk no more and were lying exhausted on the sand. The party came up with Moore, seventy miles south of Sarra and two hundred and ten miles from his starting point. He was still plodding on with swinging arms. Perfectly clear-headed and normal, he waved to them without stopping as if to an acquaintance during a walking race. He was determined to reach Tekro in the two days more which he estimated he could last out and he would probably have done so if he had not been found. With nothing to eat for ten days, except a little jam, and with only four pints of water to drink, wounded in one foot, in which a shell splinter still lodged, he had not only walked this astonishing distance, but had for several days virtually carried with him two men who were physically weaker than himself, as well as poor Winchester. That such a journey was humanly possible was due only to the fact that it was cold. In hot weather, it is most unlikely that any man could remain alive in the desert without water for more than three days.

'When found, Easton could scarcely swallow, owing to the wound in his throat from which he had suffered continuously. Finally, with a great effort, he managed to get down a few drops of sweet tea. With a little

smile he was heard to say: 'I don't usually take sugar with my tea.' He died shortly afterwards, despite all the doctor's efforts to revive him, having to the end displayed extraordinary courage and fortitude.'





In a reputedly personal account published during the war in 'Life' magazine, Ronald Moore described how 'one morning, I think it must have been the second after leaving Tighe, John Easton could not get up. Winchester and I rubbed his legs to start the circulation, and, finally, got him to his feet, but he could not stand for long — just stumbled a few paces and dropped in the sand. He did this several times, trying all he could to keep going, but I knew, somehow, by the staring look in his eyes that he was done. He asked for water, and I gave him half of what was left, but it was no good, and in a few moments he died. We just buried him where he was, in the sand, and Winchester and I went on alone. . . .' However both the communiqué broadcast by Cairo radio in April 1941 and the Scots Guards Regimental Orders published the same month,

and the regimental history 'The Scots Guards 1919-1955' by David Erskine, all state that Guardsman John Easton was still alive when found by the French patrol in whose hands he died of exposure on February 12. He was the first Scots Guardsman to give his life in North Africa: today he lies buried in Knightsbridge War Cemetery at Acroma, fifteen miles west of Tobruk on the road to Derna, where many men who were formerly buried in small isolated graves in the desert were later reburied. The cemetery lies on the lower slopes of a range of hills running parallel to the coast and is enclosed by mimosa. Colour is also provided by geraniums and vincas — a refreshing contrast to the hot grey-brown of the desert. John Easton lies in Grave 21 of Row F of Plot 8 (in the far right-hand corner). (Commonwealth War Graves Commission)



Still lying where they were buried in 1941, the graves of the Italian prisoners killed in the attack were found beside the trucks.



In 1940 Tobruk was a small but important Italian harbour on the coast of Cyrenaica in Libya. Nowadays, it is often visited by Soviet submarines, cruisers and helicopter carriers, to which it offers modern naval facilities. It is also strategically essential because of its extensive oil installations, in and outside the harbour. Apart from that, the landscape has not changed much since the sad events of the early forties. The surrounding area is arid and rocky, ending in a high ridge and escarpment that overlook and almost encircle the port and town.

At the time the Second World War started, the Italian land defences of Tobruk were contained in a 60-kilometre-long perimeter of neatly built underground concrete bunkers and open-top artillery and machine gun strong points, the lot interconnected by trenches or a series of sangars. Often the

TOBRUK REVISITED

BY VASKO BARBIC

command posts and ammunition depots were cast in concrete within natural underground caves. Incredibly, most of them are still intact, the walls still bearing names, dates, addresses in far away lands and, in some instances, even regimental badges sharply and clearly written on or hewn in the concrete. They are now of little use except as occasional shelters for the wandering shepherd, his flock of sheep or goats and some gazelles.

Water in that area is scarce and comes from wells, or 'abar' in Arabic, and natural cisterns carved out of the rock by centuries of rain.

Famous images of the Desert war . . . or are they? Frequently used to depict varied elements in the North African campaign, these pictures are in fact all contrived recreations, taken by 'Chet's Circus' in October and November 1942. Sergeant Chetwyn himself took the well-known shot *above* on October 29 — the 'German' surrendering actually sporting a broad grin. (IWM)



Sergeant Len Chetwyn, formerly of the Keystone Press Agency, Sergeant John Herbert, previously with Kodak, Sergeant Jim Mapham, who had been on the staff of the 'Leicester Mercury', and Sergeant Chris Windows, ex-Paramount, with Driver Sampey, worked together to produce some of the Second World War's most frequently used pictures which have been used to illustrate any and every stage of the battle: from Egypt to Tunisia! Although their work had the approval of the chief of No. 1 Army Film and Photographic Unit (which covered the Middle East campaign) Major David MacDonald, other AFPU photographers did not share his enthusiasm. MacDonald had worked in Hollywood with directors such as Cecil B. De Mille, and the good action shots, nicely lit and of excellent quality, both still and cine, turned in by Chet's Circus were given an instant accolade by the War



Office in London, which even produced a specially written press release to go with them: 'One of the units of the AFPU is a group of four men with a driver, with a roving commission to go wherever there is action, wherever they think they can get pictures. Their leader is Sgt Chetwyn, a former Fleet Street photographer . . . They have produced some of the finest pictures of the recent campaign and some of the most striking shots in recent newsreels have come from their cameras. Two of the men take still pictures, the other two use cine cameras . . . They live the life of the ordinary soldier in the front line, with the same rations — often only bully and biscuits — limited water and petrol, and suffer all the hardships and difficulties that go with fighting in the Western Desert. Their weapons are cameras, instead of guns, and they bring back the pictures that illustrate the deeds of the Eighth Army. . . .' (IWM)



Ian Grant, veteran AFPU combat photographer who very nearly got himself killed in Cyprus after the war by EOKA while filming for ITN news, explains how Sergeant Chetwyn obtained his material: 'He got this little group of photographers together, still and cine, and they went into a rear echelon formation of three tanks in rest areas, bribing the support of some of the troops who were relaxing, with bottles of whisky. Then they created their own little battle sequences. You got things like Chetwyn sitting on the top of a tank with, maybe, a couple of tanks riding out in echelon in front of frame of his camera. They would charge forward. In front of him he would



have a box of hand grenades and he would lob the grenades in front of him while he was filming. This was approved by the War Office, but a lot of the photographers didn't like it.' These pictures are a good illustration of the work of Chet's Circus, and much of the cine photography taken at the same time can be seen in 'Desert Victory' — the famous WWII documentary now available on our After the Battle Videocassette No. 19. *Left:* The 'Australian' officer, pistol in hand leads his men into action — photograph E18908 from the Imperial War Museum. *Right:* Shot at the same time, a still from 'Desert Victory' — reversed so that the Allies fight from east to west!

These had to be strongly protected during the war, becoming in turn strong points all of their own along and within the main defences. Naturally, whether under Italian, British or German management, battles were regularly and bitterly fought to wrest from enemy hands these precious water sources.

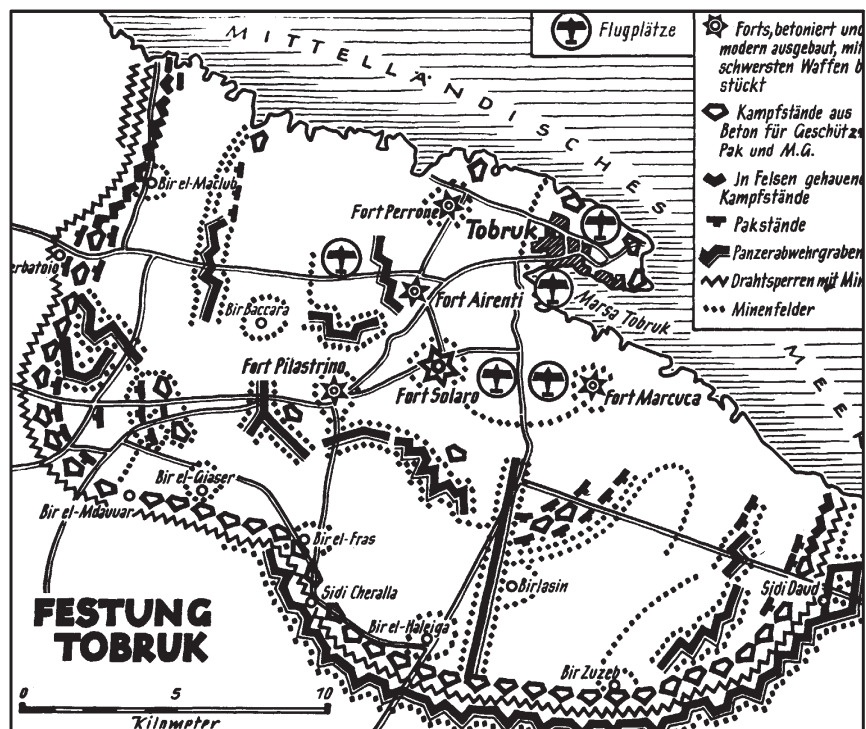
In 1981 I was sent to Libya to manage the construction of an oil terminal south of the Derna road, a 25-kilometre pipeline which ran from the terminal, across the desert to Tobruk bay and a booster station at the southern side of the harbour. I spent two years on that site with six Polish engineers, two Indians, a British technical secretary, one Ghanaian, about thirty Italian technicians, one Portuguese and over a hundred Thais and Philippinoes. Our base camp was nothing more than a square of Portacabins erected on a flat expanse between Acroma and Ras-Medawar, and comprised living quarters, offices, catering facilities, workshops, stores, a water tower, a fuel station and guard hut.

To a large extent, this area was deemed safe from uncleared minefields for all intents and purposes except for some uncharted ones which will probably never be entirely removed. Indeed, after the war, an Italian specialist company, formed by veteran experts, spent several years reclaiming the old Second World War battlefields, until some of the men were injured and the head of the team lost his life on a mine outside Tobruk. It was imperative for us, therefore, that we established at the outset, with absolute certainty, whether there were any such minefields in this area that would interfere with the construction of the project. The investigations revealed that the locations for both the terminal and the booster station were 'clean' but that the pipeline would be crossing smack through the middle of an uncleared belt of land, north-east of Ras-Medawar and west of Fort Pilastrino, going roughly from north to south. The local authorities promptly assisted by providing old maps together with a team of explosive experts from the Libyan armed forces led by an elderly NCO who once served in the Italian Army and worked later with the 'Ingilis'. With his invaluable expertise and experience and the help of three or four of our men, a bulldozer, and a lot of prudence, a fifty-metre-wide lane was successfully cleared. The operation was slow but thorough, most of the mines being of the anti-personnel 'S' type, or the Italian equivalent, which explode at groin level

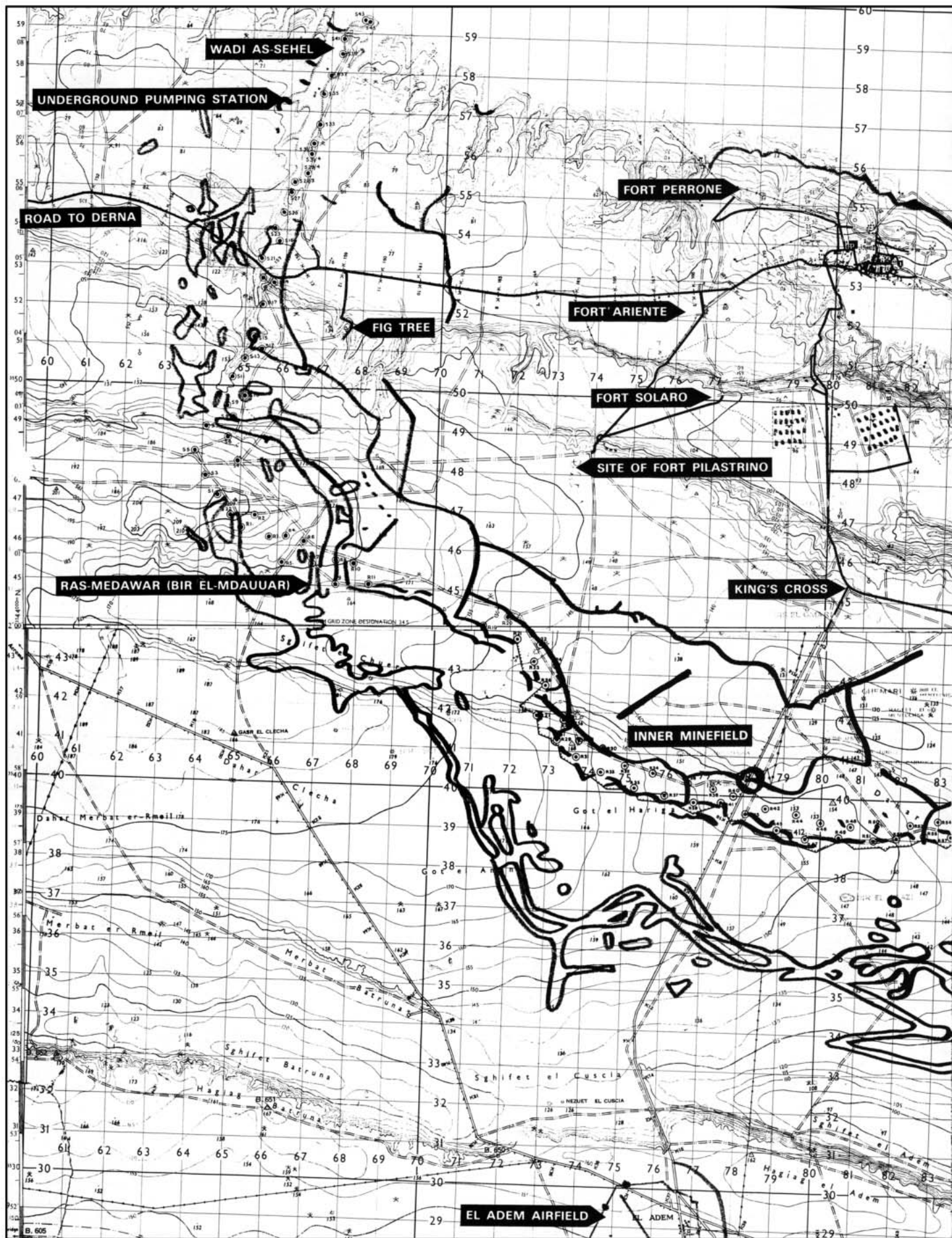
scattering steel balls in all directions, and being connected to another six or eight or even ten devices. Fortunately, the old NCO was well acquainted with this sort of booby trap and no nasty accident ever occurred. Sadly, not everyone is so lucky though. For medical and social reasons, I was regularly in contact with the Polish personnel of Tobruk's main hospital and from time to time the doctors would tell me that a child or a nomad woman or man had been brought in, from beyond the perimeter, with a mangled leg, other extensive body injuries, or even that someone had died in hospital from wounds inflicted by a mine.

Work picked up momentum and everyone

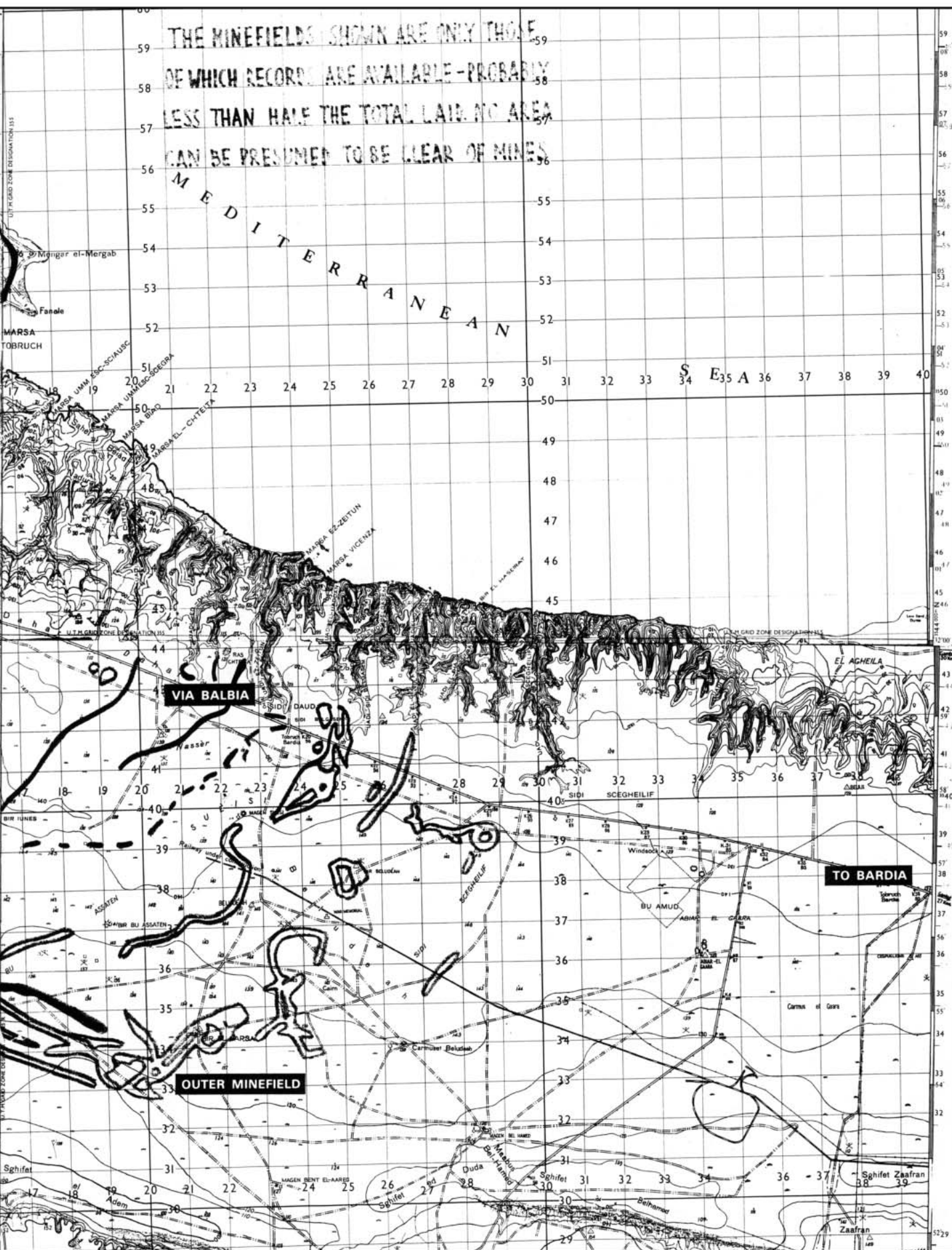
settled down into the routine of the construction site, resigned to a very monotonous and drab life, in the middle of a drab landscape of dust, rocks, thorn bushes and one large solitary, but apparently important, fig-tree. The latter is a unique and prominent landmark in an otherwise desolate place. Indeed, anyone approaching Tobruk, either from the Derna road or from the surrounding desert, cannot miss noticing it, still standing at the top of the escarpment, known as 'Ciglione Solaro' by the Italians. Understandably, this fig-tree was always clearly indicated, along with the Solaro escarpment, on British, Italian and German maps.



Fortress Tobruk — a rather stylised German version of the defences showing the anti-tank ditch, wire entanglements, strongpoints and minefields. Compare the latter with the map reproduced overleaf used by Zeke Zeleny to circumnavigate those still existing after the war. One of Colonel Gaddafi's legitimate complaints to the United Nations is that the warring nations left Libya an awful legacy of uncleared minefields.



The dangers of exploring the Tobruk battlefield mapped out by Flight Lieutenant Zeleny of the Desert Rescue Team which was based at



El Adem airfield, just outside the perimeter to the south.

Whenever the construction programme allowed it, the local holidays and Fridays were mostly spent at the neighbouring beaches, shopping in Benghazi, where cameras, video recorders and watches were cheap, or, apart from devouring a great number of novels, reconnoitring the old Second World War battlegrounds. One such day, while visiting the British War Cemetery at Acroma a mile or so from our camp, I made the fortunate acquaintance of the old warden. This energetic Libyan, who claimed to be eighty years old, knew the area and its recent past history quite well and never failed to amaze me with his knowledge. As a young man he had served in the Italian Army, in a local colonial unit, and he was lately in the 'People's Militia'. He looked after his little plot of land as well as the cemetery and had an attractive 35-year-old wife who, in his own words, 'kept him young and content, the previous one having died of old age, may Allah bless her soul!' With this veteran Askari, I shared many tea brewing sessions and interesting treks or drives to places like Knightsbridge listening to his wartime stories. We even planned a journey to the southern desert, to see the old US Air Force B-24 Liberator *Lady Be Good*, which still lies there, its back broken but otherwise fairly well preserved (see *After the Battle* No. 25). Unfortunately, we never managed to obtain the special permit from the military authorities to visit the area.

Later on, having become acquainted with the region, I started roaming around on my own in my Fiat Campagnola jeep. I would drive for a few minutes, stop the vehicle on a rise in the desert and then slowly stroll around, searching the ground for any trace of past battles, or even sit quietly on the bonnet of the jeep and simply observe the surrounding landscape. At first, when looking at the uninspiring desert, I could not understand why on earth anyone would want to attack this or that desolate spot. Then I remembered how scarce and precious water was. Even now, without a war on, we had to send two large tankers each week to pump it from a municipal reservoir in the middle of old Tobruk, and pay a high price for it, as the supply was not always sufficient for all the users. In the forties, any little mound close to a water cave or well, barely evident in the rock even from ten yards away, was turned into a strong point to protect such a source. It began to make sense and I realised how vital it must have been in war conditions, in such a place, to defend or to win one more 'bir' or well.

By the end of 1981 I managed to get hold of a copy of an Italian map (unfortunately since lost) with most of the Italian installations clearly marked. So, armed with this precious find and two books on the subject, I set off in a more organised fashion and was thus able to discover quite a few more interesting things.



Vasko Barbic at the monument marking the Knightsbridge battlefield, just outside the Tobruk perimeter to the south-west. With him is his old Libyan guide from the CWGC cemetery at Acroma (see page 7).



Everyone who fought at Tobruk on both sides will remember the 'lone pine' of Libya: the fig tree on the edge of the Solaro escarpment near the western edge of the perimeter in full view of both sides. Gunners had its range down to the last inch as it appeared on Axis and Allied maps.



A hundred yards south of the tree, Vasko found this underground artillery command post — one of the original



fortifications constructed by the Italians, still complete with Fascist inscription. It had received an almost direct hit.



The western side of the Tobruk perimeter began on the coast, at the mouth of Wadi As-sehel, a deep and wide gorge which ended in a sandy cove, where many of the Europeans used to swim in summer. The concrete casemates were very well concealed below the ridge and within the rocky face of the eastern bank of the wadi. The line of fortifications ran south and formed a large complex of bunkers where the gorge is crossed by the main Derna road. Nowadays, the latter is straddled by a Libyan security road-block and only some rusty and twisted reinforcing steel and bits of concrete remain of the old bunkers at this point.

Contrasting with all this, in the middle of the wadi bed, I discovered, half hidden by reeds and a few palm trees, a huge underground concrete pumping station. It was in good condition and bore a plaque which stated that this installation had been built by a British unit. Unfortunately I have lost the transcription but remember the date being 1942.

From the Derna road, the perimeter continued south, up the escarpment and Solaro ridge till it reached Ras-Medawar, the most prominent mound in the area. The name means Round Head or Round Promontory, and back in the last century, under Ottoman occupation, Ras-Medawar was surmounted by a stone fort. All that I found now of this Turkish work was a lot of stone rubble and part of the central staircase — but around it, on the gentle slopes, were several concrete defensive positions and stone and cement-lined trenches. I entered some of the underground bunkers and found on the walls several Italian names and addresses dated 1940 and 1941 and next to them Polish names and their old addresses in Poland, this time dated 1942. East and at about fifty yards from the remains of the fort was the ever-important natural underground cistern. During my visit the hole, about 20 feet by 15 feet and 10 feet deep, was absolutely dry and contained only the dried carcass of a gazelle and again many soldiers' names.

As I walked around the boulder-strewn position, I came across a fascinating scene. At the bottom of the western slope, in the bed of a small wadi, lay an individual slit trench, almost intact with the edges smoothed down and the floor half filled with silt by forty years of rains, but what amazed me particularly were two live British No. 36 hand-grenades, lightly rusted with the safety pins still in place, and several full clips with live .303 rounds, set neatly next to each other ready for use, lying

Smashed concrete gun positions of the Ras-Medawar strongpoint.

undisturbed on the parapet facing the fort. The cartridges, which were in very good condition with a thin coat of verdigris, were dated 1932 and 1937 and had nickel-jacketed projectiles. The sight was so real that one could easily have imagined that whoever manned this trench had just gone to relieve himself behind a bush and would soon be back with his Lee-Enfield rifle.

The other trenches further north revealed about a hundred Italian 6.5mm or 7.35mm cartridges with round noses, of the type used in the Italian 'moschetto' or Mannlicher-Carcano carbine, several empty German 20mm cases and some live 20mm shells, as used in the single or four barrelled anti-aircraft gun. Again, these were remarkably well preserved considering they had been in the open air for so many years. I later dismantled one of the German shells and found that the powder charge was enclosed in a silk bag specially shaped with a flat bottom while the primer, consisting of a finer powder, was placed at the bottom of the case in a separate bag. Later, I reassembled it and once polished it looked as new with a shiny fuse and copper-lined projectile.

The whole of the shallow valley, north-east of Ras-Medawar, was saturated with nasty looking rusty bits of shrapnel and I felt pity for those men who were caught in the open there. In one spot, chosen at random, I counted over twenty such sharp steel shards within one square yard! I believe this was the place nicknamed 'Shell Happy Valley' by the British troops.

From here, proceeding east, the going was somehow easier. Following some of the old barbed wire coils, I came upon a few British and German Teller mines which were uncovered and quite evident on the ground, mortar bombs oozing with explosive, more rifle cartridges and many Italian finned hand-grenades. Then I spotted several more underground concrete installations. In one of the communication trenches between two bunkers lay, haphazard and half buried under some blackened silt, hundreds of mortar bombs and light artillery shells of various calibres, which someone had unsuccessfully tried to burn. All along the rest of the line the pattern was more or less the same until it ended at Wadi Az-Zeitun on the Mediterranean shore, east of Tobruk.



Below the old Turkish fort, rusting wire and a trench complete with grenades.



The cemetery at Tobruk was first established during the siege on high ground five miles inland from the town on the road to Egypt by the Army Graves Registration Service. After the war



it was handed over to the Imperial War Graves Commission, as it then was, who landscaped and transformed it into a permanent war cemetery. (IWM/CWGC)

Before reaching the sea, at the side of the road to Bardia, there is a small memorial monument erected to the Black Watch or Cameron Highlanders who fell there during the Axis breakthrough in June 1942 and, opposite it across the road, sprawled over a few acres, lies the nicely kept Tobruk British and Commonwealth War Cemetery. It is built in the local yellowish stone with a rather classic and dignified entrance and a formal layout, contrasting sharply with the German ossuary which is in the form of an imposing but sinister square mediaeval fort, overlooking the oil installations in Tobruk bay. This British cemetery contains some 2,300 graves, where lie buried Hindu and Muslim Indians, New Zealanders, many Australians, young Highland infantrymen from the same unit together in several parallel rows, scores of Poles from a Carpathian Brigade, South Africans, Czechs, tank crews buried together under joined headstones to indicate a mass grave and many more soldiers from England, Wales and Ireland, all Allied casualties from the various surrounding battlefields. Upon my second visit there, I managed to locate my wife's uncle's grave near the main entrance. He died of wounds sustained when his vehicle hit a mine. The Free French formed the exception though. Their men, who were mostly killed at the battle of Bir-Hakeim south of Tobruk, were moved to a cemetery of their own, on the road to Bardia, at the corner of the junction leading to El Adem airbase. Its semi-dilapidated grounds are enclosed within a low wall, once whitewashed, and access to it is through an arch bearing a Cross of Lorraine on each pillar. Past the gate and at the far end of the grave-lined central pathway, there is a plaque in memory to the fallen and a flagpole, guarded by two British late type six-pounder anti-tank guns and two French 25mm anti-aircraft guns. Many of the dead buried there belonged to the Foreign Legion. Apart from those three war cemeteries, around Tobruk there is the one at Acroma, which I mentioned earlier — the famous Knightsbridge War Cemetery, named after the strong position and focus of communications in the area. Although it is the smaller of the two British ones, there are more than 3,700 British, Commonwealth and Allied soldiers resting in that plot, including three lone Yugoslav airmen. The Italian dead were removed and repatriated, following Gaddafi's demands!



'This is hallowed ground, for here lie those who died for their country.' Within its boundary, Royal Australian Engineers constructed this imposing memorial to honour their dead. It was dedicated by Major-General D. M. Morshead, garrison commander during the siege, on October 21, 1941. After the war it was replaced by a new obelisk of white Alamein stone. (IWM/CWGC)





By contrast, the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge chose to construct a massive ossuary, forty metres square, to house the remains of their 6,000 German dead brought in from battlefield cemeteries (left) or exhumed from isolated graves. It was dedicated on November 26, 1955.

Resuming my peregrination across the old battlefield, this time I explored the secondary line of defence. The expanse from the sea shore to the Derna road is now covered with several adjacent Libyan military garrisons and very definitely out of bounds. From the road to the bottom of the Solaro escarpment all signs of the battlefield have been obliterated, but over the ridge the defensive positions were still there, almost intact. The ground here is rocky and quite flat and the Italian fortifications, neatly built flush with the ground, are not visible until one walks over them. They belonged, as one plaque stated, to the 233rd Battalion of Volunteers of the II and III Colonial Artillery Army Corps and ran south in a series of interconnected concrete bunkers and trenches, in front of which were many zig-zagging positions made above ground, sangar-like, of boulders and dried mud. The area was littered with dried bits of Italian leather accoutrements, the grey-green colour still clearly visible, and the usual unexploded shells and grenades. Here I found about ten live .45 US-made rounds, of the type used in Thompson sub-machine guns, along with a silver coin on a thin chain, bearing the effigy of King Edward VII, and close by a large Italian embossed copper badge, as worn over a cockade on pith helmets, consisting of two crossed cannons, the number 382 and a crown. A small distance down the line, I discovered a bunker full of unexploded mortar bombs and an Italian bayonet.

TOBRUK DIARY

June 1940 Commander of the Italian forces in Libya, Marshal Balbo, shot down by Italian guns while flying over Tobruk and Marshal Graziani appointed to take his place.

December 1940 Allied forces under General Sir Richard O'Connor advance in a major offensive against the Italians.

January 1941 British and Australian troops enter Tobruk.

April 1941 German forces under General Erwin Rommel push the British back eastward — the decision is taken to defend Tobruk reinforced with Australian troops. The siege of the 23,000-man garrison begins.

June 1941 An attempt is made to relieve Tobruk by General Sir Archibald Wavell who is later relieved as C-in-C Middle East.

August 1941 The Royal Navy manages to evacuate 5,000 of the besieged soldiers and bring in 6,000 fresh troops.

September 1941 Another 6,000 Australians in the perimeter are replaced and 2,000 tons of supplies brought in.

November 1941 The Allied offensive begins in Libya and troops break out to threaten the rear of German forces. Bitter tank battles lead to Allied retreat which is stopped by General Sir Claude Auchinleck.

December 1941 Another attack launched on German forces under Rommel leads to Tobruk being relieved.

May 1942 Rommel mounts a surprise attack and advances south of Tobruk near Bir Hakim.

June 1942 French forces at Bir Hakim are attacked by the Afrika Korps. Fierce tank battles around Knightsbridge crossroads south of Tobruk give the area the name of 'the Cauldron'. German forces penetrate the perimeter and Fortress Tobruk falls with 35,000 Allied soldiers captured.

October 1942 The Eighth Army launches its main offensive at El Alamein, breaks through the German defences and begins an advance which puts the Axis forces on the retreat.

November 1942 Tobruk recaptured by British Forces.

May 1943 Axis forces in North Africa surrender.



An endless stream of German and Italian prisoners march towards Tobruk after the first siege ended on December 9, 1941. (IWM)



In May 1945, two years after North Africa had been liberated, the desert wastes of Cyrenaica were still claiming their toll of dead and injured. The problem of clearing the thousands of



tons of ammunition was enormous: pictures show an explosives expert from the Royal Army Ordnance Corps preparing shells and mortar bombs for demolition.

Meanwhile, our excavation of the trench for the pipeline revealed several war relics, some indeed sad. First there was a twisted and rusted Lee-Enfield rifle and several of its .303 live cartridges. Then, my men found a German banner and signalling flags, similar to the ones used in British tanks, which promptly disappeared in someone's cabin. On another day they uncovered the remains of human legs which they reburied on the edge of the minefield. Later, further on, they came up with artillery duds, .55in Boys' anti-tank rifle magazines . . . more unexploded shells . . . a tattered tunic . . .

The map I had, indicated the existence of three more forts — Pilastrino, Solaro and Ariento — and a network of narrow military roads within the defensive perimeter. Many parts of these stone-lined arteries are still usable in their original configuration, while others have been tarmaced by the Libyans for their own military purposes. The network has not changed much since the war and the main access to the locations of the Italian forts is, to this day, from the Derna road. Having decided to verify if these still existed, I

followed this route and turned right about a mile from Tobruk at the corner of the main hospital to reach the Solaro escarpment where the metal road ends. I continued on the old one, which climbs up and over the ridge. Once there, I discreetly set out, map in hand, to locate Forte Ariento and Forte Solaro, the first two along the way. To my disappointment, except for a seven-foot-high stone bearing some illegible Italian markings and writings which had been chiselled out by the British or the Libyans after the war, there were no traces of the two forts to be seen. The area where Forte Solaro should have been was now occupied by a military complex and a huge telecommunications trellis mast.

I resumed the drive and reached a second escarpment, at the foot of which the barren landscape is dominated on the left of the track by an old Italian military post, its workshop and pumphouse derelict. Inside the large building, the walls were decorated with British regimental badges, cartoons and many English names. The adjoining area was littered with thousands of 20mm Italian and German projectiles, Bren gun magazines,

.303 and 7.92mm rounds, shoulder high crates full of Italian 6.5mm and 7.35mm rifle ammunition still in their clips, artillery shells and mortar bombs of various types and calibres, Bangalore torpedoes, German and Italian jerrycans and metal ammunition boxes, aircraft bombs, hand-grenades, etc.. I paid several visits to this dump and, after carefully rumaging amongst the numerous piles, I built up an interesting collection of assorted shells, including a complete 8.8cm 'panzergrate' and a Teller mine, which I kept in my office. It helped to shorten meetings drastically!

Up the escarpment and then bearing south-west, I reached a concrete bridge built by the Italian Army engineers in the particular style of the period and, beyond it, past a small monument bearing Fascist and military symbols, I hit upon what had been once Forte Pilastrino, Major-General Morshead's headquarters during the siege in 1941. Although a lot of rubble and a few standing walls are all that is left of it, the fort layout is still discernible. There was a ramp and a multiple garage outside facing the main gate.



Forty years later Vasko Barbic discovered a huge dump (see also centre pages) in the Tobruk perimeter. Visible in this

picture are shells, mines and Bangalore torpedoes — explosive-filled 'drainpipe' for blowing gaps in wire entanglements.



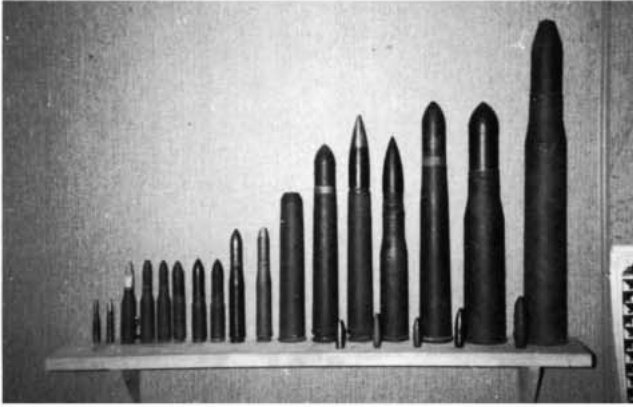
Past the entrance, the living quarters and offices must have been left and right of the centre court, with the stores probably at the western side, opposite the entrance. Here, the far end of the court was dominated by an altar and possibly the flagpole. Forte Pilastrino was the hub from which the military tracks, dipping gently, radiated towards El Adem, El Duda, Ras-Medawar, Knightsbridge and Acroma. Apart from the usual mortar bombs and artillery shells found in its outer defences and some Italian leather accoutrements, amazingly, the fort itself yielded not a single relic.

A drive in the opposite direction and towards the sea, down Wadi Auda, turned out to be less disappointing. The wadi is more like a lush valley covered with little cultivated plots and lots of trees and palms, opening out onto a white sandy beach, where some of the young natives nowadays go to picnic and secretly indulge in some hard drinking. At its entrance a fort hangs high up on the side of the steep and rocky eastern cliff. I drove back and reached the top through the newly built-up area of the town and more military establishments surrounded with high walls. From here, the fort is not easily discernible as its roof is flush with the ground. It was not marked on the Italian map I had, but, judging from its style, it must have been built by the Italian Army. I reached the main entrance down a flight of steps and the heavy steel door, still intact, swung open without difficulty. I walked in carefully to find that the premises were heavily 'mined' with human excrement, fortunately not of too recent origin. The building was in remarkably good condition, its roof, made of concrete slabs supported by steel beams, unscathed by the war and the cream painted walls covered with Arab graffiti.

Generally, the many excursions I made on the Tobruk battlefields went quite smoothly and my Fiat jeep took me everywhere without problems, except once. One Friday, I started off, as usual in the morning, with the intention of trying this time the track which joins Ras-Medawar to Forte Pilastrino. As it started to pour with rain I decided to abort the drive and instead take a short-cut across country. I drove north into the seeming safety of a flat expanse and only realised too late that it had turned into a sea of mud. In the middle

Above: Mortar bombs, below thousands of rounds of 20mm. Bottom: Aircraft bombs and artillery shells.





of it, regardless of all the clever shifting of gears and manoeuvring, the Fiat floundered deep to its axles. After about an hour of vain efforts, I left it there and trekked all the way to the old military road. I was soaking wet and covered with mud, but luckily, near the ammunition dump, a laughing Libyan stopped and offered me a lift all the way to our camp. Grateful, I decided to relax and join in the laugh!

Except for the minefield which had been cleared at an early stage, astonishingly, all along the route of the pipeline work progressed normally without any hindrance from buried ordnance. Then towards the final stage, just when we felt with certainty that we had 'got away with it', while the high security wall was being completed around the terminal and excavation for the pillars of the main gate was being carried out, the mechanical digger hit something solid and metallic with its bucket. The Italian foreman, well aware of such an eventuality and sensing danger, stopped the work immediately and came to inform me of the problem. We cleared the object carefully by hand and were confronted with what looked to me to be a bomb, approximately three and a half feet long and about ten inches in diameter. I promptly asked for the assistance of the explosive experts. A captain and the old NCO arrived soon enough and with some of their men lifted it out of the three-foot-deep hole and hauled it away without difficulty, much to our relief. Later, sipping a well deserved cup of tea in my office, the officers explained that the device was in fact a dud shell, fired from off shore by the main artillery of a large warship. In retrospect, remembering this incident, I cannot help wondering how many more such unexploded devices still remain unsuspectingly buried under all those tons of petrol and oil!

Vasko built up quite a collection in his office including a Lee-Enfield dug up while excavating for the new pipeline. All had to be left behind when he left Libya.



Not strictly relics of the WWII battles but of interest nevertheless. Inland between Derna and Barce, a hundred miles or so west of Tobruk, the old British and American gunnery ranges offered some battered specimens. Above: Remains of an M5 Stuart and below a Buffalo.



Two Dingos, one still bearing the horn and lanyard insignia of a light infantry regiment.

Thus, my two-year assignment in the Tobruk area came to a close. Although it gave me the opportunity to live on the spot for the whole of the period, visit the old battlefields many times and gain a first hand impression of the place and a clearer idea of how it must have been during those days of war, I left Libya slightly disappointed. I am very interested in armoured fighting vehicles and I had not seen or come across a single one. During my tours, I went as far as Benghazi on the coastal road — the Via Balbia — as well as the desert route and all I managed to find were the wrecks of Buffalos, Stuarts, Dingo scout cars and American anti-aircraft guns which served as targets in the desert between and south of Derna and Barce. Around, and sometimes embedded in the wrecks, were lots of bits of warheads from air-to-ground rockets fired in the sixties by US and Royal Air Force jet fighters during practice runs. Closer to Tobruk, and a few miles west of our camp, a partially-gutted Second World War torpedo lay in shallow waters, its warhead resting on the beach and pointing at the sand dunes beyond. Still further west and fifty yards from the beach, where I was taken by a Polish doctor who claimed to have discovered a 'Tiger tank with a big gun', I found the incongruous remains of a Soviet made T-54! Apparently, the latter had been abandoned by the Egyptians after the short 1977 war; and from all the wires, fibreglass fins and empty shell cases, it must have been used later by the Libyans to test wire-guided missiles and recoilless rifles, as well as the resistance of the Soviet armour to these Western-made weapons.

Because of stringent customs controls when leaving the country, the only souvenirs I managed to retain to mark my two years' investigating the Tobruk battlefield were a German Army fork, made of light alloy and bearing the markings A.W.J.R.—S.40 over the Wehrmacht eagle and Swastika emblem stamped on the back of the handle and a box of English 'Tortoiseshell Sliced Plug' brand tobacco!

Veteran of a more recent war — an Egyptian T-54 abandoned during the short 1977 conflict and used by the Libyans for weapons' evaluation.



**AFTER THE
BATTLE**
WRECK RECOVERY



NORMANDY TYPHOON

In the weeks and months following the Normandy invasion in June 1944, Allied air support over the battlefield manifested itself primarily in the form of devastating low-level air strikes delivered by that most formidable of weapons — the Hawker Typhoon. German mechanised units developed a keen respect, bordering on terror, when the dreaded 'Jabos'

were sighted, turning the steeply-banked Normandy lanes into clogged killing grounds. The Falaise area in particular was picked out for special attention as the German Seventh Army and the Fifth Panzer Army struggled to extricate themselves from the noose being drawn around their necks by the British, Canadians and Poles in the north and the

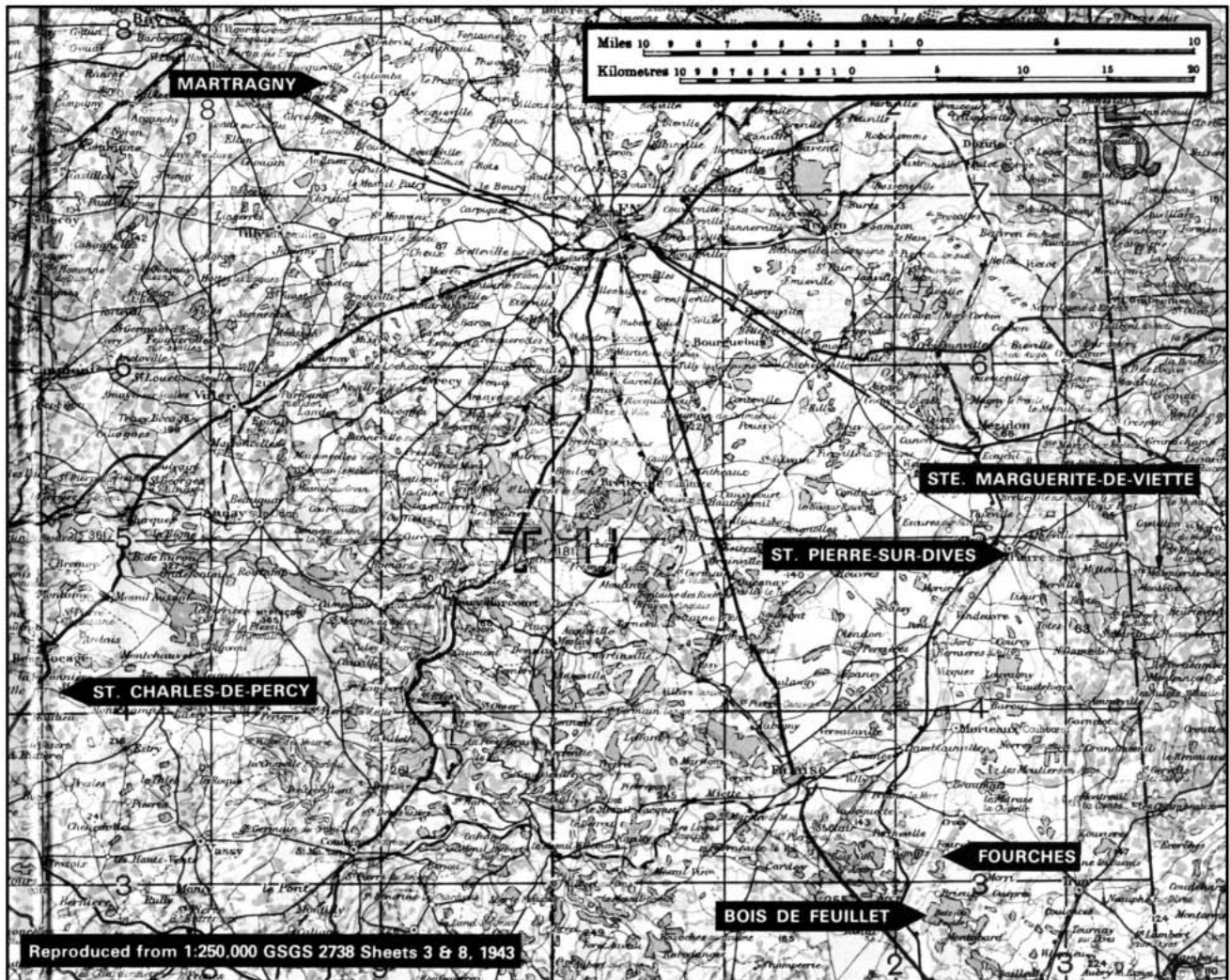
Americans in the south. From the earliest days of the 'Battle of the Falaise Pocket', the devastating strike qualities of the Typhoon were an invaluable asset to the Allied arsenal.

One of the Typhoon squadrons operating at this time was No. 198 Squadron at Airstrip B7 at Martragny, beside the N13 four miles south-east of Bayeux. Martragny was a typical



Top: Martragny airstrip B7, constructed on the site of the old Bayeux aerodrome between June 14-26, 1944 with a single 4,000ft runway. (IWM) **Above:** It became the forward base of No. 198 Squadron of the 2nd Tactical Air Force. This picture was taken in July, just before 22-year old Flight Sergeant Reg Thursby joined the squadron. Standing L-R: F/Sgt Sibbald, P/O Sellman, F/O Gleddow (Squadron Engineer), F/O Hardy,

DFC (Can.), Lt. Brisdoux (Fr.), F/Lt Pye, F/Lt Sweeting, DFC, S/Ldr Ezanno, DFC (Fr.), F/Lt Kirsch (Can.), S/Ldr Ridler, F/Lt Chalmers, F/Lt MacLennan, F/O Lumsdon (NZ), F/Lt Edgar (Squadron Doctor), the Adjutant. Sitting mainplanes L-R: F/Sgt Coulson, P/O Morley, P/O Linter, F/Lt Sheppard, F/Sgt Bryant, W/O Pointz, F/Sgt Madgett, Sgt. White. Sitting on engine: P/O Hallett and Sgt Ford.



forward landing ground, possessing only the most basic facilities. On August 9 the squadron was detailed to execute an armed reconnaissance of the Falaise area; in actual fact, this operation was classed as an Army back-up patrol. Led by its French Commanding Officer, Squadron Leader Paul Ezanno, the squadron took off at 6.15 p.m., to attack troop/tank concentrations in the Bois de

Feuillet south of the Falaise-Trun road. It was getting dark and visibility was poor. At 6.30 p.m. a strike was carried out on a gun position at nearby Fourches by Green Section, led by Flight Lieutenant Denis Sweeting, during which his Number Four, Flight Sergeant Reginald Thursby, called over the radio that his Typhoon had been hit and was on fire but that he thought he could make it back to base.

GSGS 2738 Sheet 3a/8. (Crown Copyright)

He was given a course to steer for the British lines and was seen leaving the area with smoke trailing from his aircraft. A few minutes later he was heard on the R/T requesting a bearing for B7 and reported that: 'I am losing height'. Thirty seconds later came a final message: 'I am going to bale out'.



Operations Record Book, 198 Squadron 9th August 1944: 'Eight aircraft took off at 1815 for Armed Recce Falaise-Argentan area. Blue Section: 1 S/Ldr Ezanno DFC, 2 P/O Ford, 3 F/O

Rainsforth, 4 F/Lt Sheppard. Green Section: 1 F/Lt Sweeting DFC, 2 F/Sgt Bryant, 3 F/O Hardy, 4 F/Sgt Thursby. Visibility poor and getting dark.' (IWM)



In the little hamlet of Sainte-Marguerite-de-Viette, three kilometres from Boissei just east of Saint-Pierre-sur-Dives, locals recall that the aircraft arrived low and, banking round, flew right above a German Flak battery emplaced on the eastern side of the wooded hill, the Bois de Quévrue. The battery opened fire on the already crippled aircraft and it suffered repeated hits. According to eyewitnesses, the Typhoon climbed slightly and the canopy hood opened but suddenly the aircraft rolled over and dived into the ground on the edge of the wood. JR256 was one of three Typhoons lost over Normandy that day and Flight Sergeant Thursby was reported as missing.

Normally the German authorities sent comprehensive telegrams listing British casualties to the International Red Cross Committee in Geneva which had set up a liaison office in London in 1939. The pre-war Casualty Branch at the Air Ministry (known as S.7 Cas.) had been rapidly expanded (and re-titled P.4 Cas.) to cope with the increased work load. After the withdrawal of British forces from the Continent in 1940, the interval between the date of a crash and the notification of the fate of a crew naturally increased. As air operations over the Continent of Europe gathered strength, the Casualty Branch found itself unable to cope with examining all the evidence appertaining to missing aircraft and a new office, the Missing Research Section, was initially formed under a Flight Lieutenant and two civilian clerks in December 1941. Up to D-Day this small section was obliged to carry out all its investigations from London by sifting every scrap of news on the fate of aircrews for authenticity. Every missing aircraft had its own file and into these were gathered information as it came in from a variety of sources: the individual Red Cross societies of France, Belgium and Holland, Allied agents, the Resistance movements, escapers and evaders and so on, and, where considered reliable, news of the fate of airmen was passed to the next of kin.

Depending on the circumstances of the failure to return from ops, crews were recorded as 'Missing', 'Missing believed

ORB: 'Attacks made with cannon fire on MET S. of Falaise and a gun position attacked in same area with rockets claimed knocked out. Green 4 called up and said his aircraft had been hit and was on fire, but could reach our lines. Given a course for nearest point. Squadron continued attacks on ground targets and Blue 2's aircraft was hit. Light flak fairly intense and accurate. Green 4 was heard to call saying he was baling out. Nothing further heard. Blue 2 made emergency landing at B.10. Remainder of Squadron returned to B.7 landing at 1925. Claims: 1 Gun position destroyed, 4 MET destroyed, 2 MET damaged.

killed' or 'Missing believed prisoner-of-war', and the relatives notified accordingly. In the case of Flight Sergeant Thursby, on August 10 his commanding officer reported the facts of his last flight and said that although the last message from the pilot was that he was baling out, it was not known whether or not he had landed in Allied or enemy lines. Consequently he was simply classified as missing. With the turmoil of the closing stages of the Falaise battle, the Germans were far too preoccupied to investigate crashes and thus the battle moved on across France with the ultimate fate of many aircrews shot down over Normandy unresolved.

In December 1944 approval was granted by Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force, for a unit of the Missing Research Service to begin search operations in France. The establishment of No. 1 Section was one Squadron Leader in charge, six Flight Lieutenants who acted as search officers, six drivers and one clerk. As the proportion of missing crewmen was believed to be 69 per cent RAF, 17 per cent RCAF, 7 per cent RAAF, 3 per cent RNZAF and 4 per cent Allies, of the six search officers, three were drawn from the RAF and one each from the Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Air Forces. (The Americans had their own investigative personnel.) All were volunteers and were chosen for their knowledge of the French language, each of the first six search officers having been in business in France before the war.

The unit was based in Paris but because of the severe winter in 1944, operations could not really get under way until February 1945. The work confronting No. 1 Section was facilitated to an enormous degree by the investigation work already carried out by Madame

L'Herbier of the French Red Cross who was a member of a section known as the Amicale des Infirmières Pilotes et des Secouristes de l'Air (Union of Pilot Nurses and Air Rescuers). This lady, who was afterwards decorated with the Order of the British Empire for her services, found herself in 1940 without ambulance aircraft and obtained the consent of the Germans to visit hospitals in France to glean information about members of the French Air Force. By degrees she was able to extend her activities to the collection of details of aircraft crashes and graves of missing airmen, including those of the Royal Air Force and Dominion and Allied air forces. When the head of the Casualty Branch visited Paris in November 1944 she was able to produce a mass of carefully documented records relating to the fate and burial places of large numbers of British, Dominion and Allied airmen, together with a carefully preserved collection of relics and personal effects. Madame L'Herbier had, in fact, anticipated by some years the activities of the RAF Missing Research Service, and the results of her efforts were of inestimable value to the Casualty Branch and to No. 1 Section in their early approaches to the immense problem confronting them.

With the cessation of hostilities in May 1945 it was seen that if the task of locating all the 42,000 airmen reported missing in the European Theatre was to be completed within a reasonable period, considerable expansion and reorganisation was required. At a conference held at the Air Ministry on July 26 it was decided to create a Missing Research and Enquiry Service, each MRES unit to comprise 118 personnel. No. 1 MRES was to cover France and Luxembourg; No. 2 Belgium, Holland, Czechoslovakia and the French Zone

Ref: 1968/901/59/P.1.

No: 198 Squadron,

Royal Air Force, 6

of British Liberation Army.

10th August, 1944.

Sir, **CIRCUMSTANTIAL REPORT - 1324891 P/Sgt THURSBY, R.A.F.**
Reported Missing on 9th August, 1944.

I have the honour to refer to 123 Wing Headquarters signal T.201 dated 9th August, 1944, and to submit the following circumstantial report on the above named airman reported missing from operations

2. Eight Typhoons 1B of 198 Squadron, led by S/Ldr Y.P.E.H. Szanno, C de G., took off from B.7. A.L.G., Martragny, France at 1815 hours on 9th August, 1944, on an ARMED RECCO south of FALAISE, P/Sgt Thursby was flying in Green Section made up of four aircraft, led by S/Lt: Sweating B.F.C. and P/Sgt Thursby was flying as Green 4.

3. At about 1830 hours this section attacked gun positions at FOURCHES and afterwards made an attack on the BOIS DE FEUILLET in which movement of troops and tanks had been suspected. After this attack Green 4 (P/Sgt Thursby) called up on the R/T to say that he had been hit by flak and was on fire, but that he would try to put the fire out, and make for our lines. The last time he was seen he was he was climbing with a slight stream of smoke pouring from his aircraft.

4. He asked for a homing and two minutes later informed Operations on the R/T that he was going to bale out. It is uncertain whether he landed in our own lines or the enemy lines. Nothing further has been heard of P/Sgt Thursby and he has been reported 'Missing'

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your obedient servant,

Tranua
Squadron Leader, Commanding,
No: 198 SQUADRON, R.A.F.



of Germany; No. 3 Norway, Denmark and the American Zone of Germany and No. 4 Poland and the British and Soviet Zones of Germany. (Later in 1946 No. 5 MREU was formed to cover operations in Italy, the Balkans and Mediterranean area.) Such was their success in locating the remains of missing airmen that by 1949 over 22,000 Air Force personnel had been accounted for and given proper burial.

The crash site at the Bois de Quévrue was first visited by the RAF in February 1945, the MRS reporting that the crater was full of water (the aircraft had in fact crashed onto the site of a natural spring) with no trace of the pilot. The identity of the wreckage was established from markings on the wings and tail which remained above ground as JR256 and squadron records gave the name of the pilot on its last flight. His precise fate was unknown. Several local eye-witnesses reported seeing a parachute before the aircraft crashed and the last radio message heard from Flight Sergeant Thursby was that he was about to bale out. Although a fragment of uniform was found, it was always possible that this could have been torn from the pilot's jacket as he jumped from the machine, and that most probably his body still lay undiscovered elsewhere. The site was revisited by the RAF in



One of Reg Thursby's unfired 60lb rockets recovered from the crash site on the edge of the Bois de Quévrue near Sainte-Marguerite-de-Viette.



The dedicated team from the Bayeux Museum who carried out the recovery operation. Monsieur Michel Bonnissent, the local

mayor, who masterminded the project, is third from right. (Pictures courtesy Jean-Pierre Benamou.)

June 1945 but the wet, boggy nature of the ground precluded further investigation.

Part of the wreckage was carted away for scrap in 1948 and the remainder above ground was cleared in 1952. Thereafter, to all intents and purposes, the incident was forgotten: just another mystery of a pilot missing in action which slowly faded from memory — re-kindled only by a chance conversation forty years later.

In 1984, at Saint-Pierre-sur-Dives, a name synonymous with the final stages of the closure of the Falaise pocket, Madame Marianne Gibert was discussing the elaborate preparations being made to celebrate the anniversary of the invasion with Monsieur and Madame George Villette, who remarked to her that 'it is a shame to spend so much energy on speeches when there is a poor young man still lying in the wood up there, forgotten by everybody'. This statement immediately fired Madame Gibert's interest and she was guided to the spot where the Typhoon had crashed, now a small pond. Scattered around were a few small pieces of alloy while a launching rail from one of the under-wing rockets protruded from the ground. As George Villette and his wife were convinced the pilot's remains were still there, Madame Gibert was of the firm opinion that something must be done to give the airman, whoever he was, an honourable burial.

She promptly contacted the mayor of Sainte-Marguerite-de-Viette (the nearest village to the crash site), Monsieur Michel Bonnissent, who gave his enthusiastic blessing to the proposal. He contacted the British Embassy in Paris, proposing either to have the pilot exhumed or else construct a memorial on the site. At the same time he asked for the name of the pilot, giving the date of the crash as he knew it. However, as Monsieur Bonnissent could not give the type of aircraft, and in view of the fact that the date given turned out to be incorrect, there was insufficient evidence for the RAF Historical Branch in London to identify the particular aircraft in question. In their reply the British Embassy reiterated official Ministry of Defence policy: that all crash sites known or believed to contain human remains should be left as a natural grave and not disturbed.

This response was received with considerable surprise by Madame Gibert and Monsieur Bonnissent and they interpreted it as indifference by the British to their war dead. 'In that case', said Monsieur Bonnissent, 'if they do not want him I will have him buried in the village cemetery'.

Having heard of someone in Tilly-sur-Seulles (west of Caen) who had recently dug up an aircraft engine, he contacted the person concerned, Monsieur Jacques Bréhin, who in turn got in touch with Monsieur Jean-Pierre Benamou, the curator of the Memorial Museum at Bayeux, who was in the process of building up a collection of aviation relics for an extension to the museum. He discussed the matter with some ex-RAF pilots visiting the museum who gave 'moral' agreement to the proposal while making it clear that they themselves did not have the right to give formal permission to recover the pilot.

In the United Kingdom the Ministry of Defence operates a Code of Guidance for the recovery of crashed wartime aircraft. While this does not have the force of law, certain provisions covering the finding of armaments and human remains do put an obligation on a citizen to inform the police of such a discovery. However the Ministry does not have any jurisdiction over crashes in France or any foreign country and the Government relies on goodwill to ensure that people refrain from recovering British aircrew. The whole subject is an emotive one with merits on both sides of the argument, and each reader will have his or her own views on the subject. Nevertheless to the French, to whom the recovery of the remains of servicemen from the two world



Doreen Young examines the radio set from which her fiancé broadcast his last message. (Ken Rimell)

Wars is an everyday event — the reality of the aftermath of war — the fact that such remains where known should not be accorded a decent burial would never be the subject of lengthy debate, least of all by Madame Gibert.

Early on September 10, 1985, more than a year after that first conversation, a small team began work to pump out the crater. At a depth of four metres the radio came to light, followed by armour plate. Another metre and the recovery of the pilot's parachute confirmed indeed that he had died in his aircraft. The use of the hydraulic shovel was immediately discontinued and two members of the team began the grim task of recovering the human remains. Working waist-deep in water, they could only search blind with their hands, yet 75 per cent of the pilot was eventually brought out. With only ten French people present, a pause . . . a minute's silence . . . as a mark of respect for a young life lost. Also found were the pilot's belt and revolver and oxygen mask.

The team returned the following day to dig deeper and recover the engine but when they

reached the wet, boggy excavation they found the sides had collapsed and surrounding trees were slipping forward. These were secured with ropes and the engine was finally recovered at a depth of eight metres — over 24 feet! As the mud at the bottom was being sifted for the remainder of the pilot, the hole suddenly collapsed and with it a dozen trees.

On September 14 the British Embassy was informed, and Wing Commander A. P. Bell visited Sainte Marguerite. He was shown a piece of wreckage with the serial number JR256 but while waiting for notification of the official identification, Monsieur Benamou contacted Denis Sweeting, Green Section leader of the squadron, after he found a piece of paper in the radio stating '123 Wing'. He also contacted Paul Ezanno who, when he heard that the number was JR256, stated straightaway: 'That was Reginald'.

When the local French Prefet learned of the disobedience of one of his mayors he was not at all pleased that Monsieur Bonnissent had gone against the wishes of the British authorities.



The 2,000 hp Napier Sabre engine with its 24 cylinders in an H-layout. (Ken Rimell)



The Royal Air Force brought in a contingent from the RAF Regiment at Wildenrath for a full military funeral at Saint-Charles-de-Percy cemetery. (Ken Rimell)

Meanwhile in Britain, once the identity of the pilot had been established, the Personnel Management Branch of the RAF set about tracing the next of kin. Sergeant Thursby was an only child and his father was recorded as having died in 1929. It was not known if his mother was still alive and every possible

method — local police, electoral registers, ex-servicemen's associations — were employed to try to locate any surviving relatives. In the end it was in answer to an advertisement placed in the *Daily Mail* that a distant cousin came forward. Although unable to prove his relationship according to full legal require-

ments, it turned out that Reg Thursby's mother had since passed away never knowing what had happened to her son.

Meanwhile the remains had been taken by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and preparations for a full military funeral set in motion. Today most British war cemeteries are closed to further burials and the nearest 'open' one in that area of France was that at Saint-Charles-de-Percy, near le Bény Bocage on the road from Caen to Vire, some 60 kilometres to the west from where Reg Thursby met his death.

The funeral on November 5 was led by the senior RAF Padre, Group Captain Michael Stokes, the RAF Regiment contingent consisting of a bearer party and firing party being flown in from Germany. Standard bearers representing the French Resistance were also present, together with a sizeable group of former Typhoon pilots. Leading No. 198 Squadron's tribute was its wartime leader Paul Ezanno, DFC, together with Titch Hallett, DFC, Alex Sibbald, George Sheppard and Denis Sweeting, DFC, all contemporaries of Thursby. Also present at the funeral was Thursby's former fiancée Doreen Young. Doreen had known Reg since their schooldays in London when he attended West Kensington Central School, moving later to the South Coast due to his father's ill-health. Upon his father's death, the family moved back to Shepherd's Bush in London, from whence he joined the Air Force.

It is gratifying to note that the opinions of both Reg Thursby's next-of-kin and his former squadron colleagues were entirely favourable towards the recovery of JR256 and its pilot. As far as Marianne Gibert and George Vilette and his wife were concerned, their feelings were simple: it was a fitting conclusion to their own firm belief voiced during the anniversary razzmatazz that actions should speak louder than words.



Reg Thursby lasted only five weeks — he was shot down on his 16th operational sortie. Although he remained missing for forty years, the RAF's Missing Research and Enquiry Service left no stone unturned to endeavour tracing the 40,000-odd aircrew who failed to return from operations over Europe. By 1950 they had achieved 50 per cent success and Thursby is the first missing RAF pilot to be discovered in France for many years. In total contrast, little effort was made after the war in the United

Kingdom to recover the remains of missing RAF (and German) pilots, which has resulted in several being found by private individuals in recent years, arousing much heated debate.

Above: Ken Rimell organised a reunion of Reg Thursby's former squadron colleagues and they flew to France in a formation of light aircraft to pay their last respects. L-R: Ken Kneen, Tatters Tatham, Alex Sibbald, Denis Sweeting, Titch Hallett, George Sheppard, Paul Ezanno and Jos Reynolds. (Ken Rimell)







Main entrance to Fort Breendonk, built in 1906-14, which became in World War II a bastion of Gestapo activity during the dark years of Nazi occupation in Belgium. The 'then' pictures

we have used here, taken by Sergeant Hardy two weeks after the prison's liberation on September 4, 1944, feature alleged Belgian collaborators being held pending trial. (IWM)

THE NOTORIOUS FORT BREENDONK

BY ACHIEL RELY

The most notorious place in Belgium during the Nazi occupation was undoubtedly Fort Breendonk, the southernmost of the Antwerp defences built during the early part of the century. Conveniently situated at the intersection of important roads, the fort was taken over by the Germans in 1940 as a reception camp (Auffangslager) from where civilian prisoners were likely to be sent elsewhere. It very soon became a bastion of the Gestapo in

occupied Belgium, and in due course a place of terror aimed at crushing all civil resistance.

Breendonk itself was a small municipality of about 3,000 people, a mainly farming community, in Klein Brabant between the rivers Scheldt and Rupel in the province of Antwerp. The term 'Bredendonc' by which the vicinity was referred to in the early thirteenth century meant large marsh.

Under the 'perpetual neutrality' imposed on

Belgium by Austria, Russia, Prussia, France, and Britain by the Treaty of London in 1839, it was not until 1909 that Belgium introduced the principle of a national army; meanwhile the nation placed its trust in fortifications. Inspired by the great Belgian engineer Henri Alexis Brialmont, three major fortified areas — barrier systems, *forts d'arrêt* — were



Today, the fort has been preserved as a National Memorial to all those unfortunate souls who perished behind its sombre walls.



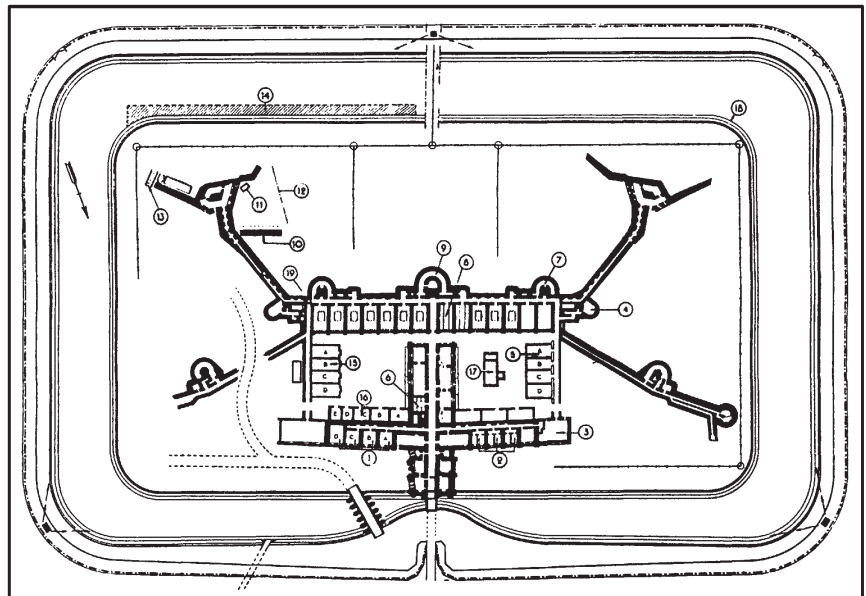
Fort Breendonk from the air as it appears today; several of the fort's thirty gun emplacements are plainly visible.

developed: at Liège (six large forts and six smaller ones) and Namur (four large and five small), with a great national 'keep' at Antwerp. Mobilisation plans of 1913 envisaged the following strengths: Field Army 150,000, Antwerp garrison 90,000, Liège garrison 22,500, Namur garrison 17,500, Reserves 60,000.

Fort Breendonk formed part of the external defence belt of Antwerp fortifications upon which work was started in 1906, two of the forts, Lier and Walem, having been built by

Brialmont in 1877. About six miles from end to end, these fortifications comprised seventeen forts, twelve redoubts, and the means of flooding certain areas. They were sited about twice as far out as the half-circle built during the previous century (the 'inner defences' as these became), as development in artillery and the lessons to be learned from the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5 pointed to the fact that the earlier forts, only three miles out, lay too close to Antwerp to place the city beyond the range of an attacker's guns.

Fort Breendonk, with its thirty guns (150, 120, 75 and 57mm), was to cost 2,200 gold francs. The earth from the large ditch that was dug around the fort was used to cover many of the buildings, so that a large part of it lay below ground. The nearest fort to the west was that built at Liezele, and to the east Fort Walem, with a bunker at Letterheide between. The land between the two forts could be flooded. Work on the fort had yet to be completed when the Germans violated Belgian neutrality in August 1914.



Left: The fort, about twelve miles south of Antwerp, was built as part of the city's defence line. (Reproduced from Michelin Sheet 213, 12th Edition.) Right: General plan of the fort. 1: SS offices; 2: Gestapo interrogation offices; 3: Sanitary block; 4: Torture chamber; 5: Hutments; 6: Dungeons; 7: Mortuary;

8: Cells; 9: Cupola; 10: Execution posts; 11: Site of gallows; 12: Screen to hide execution site; 13: Food store; 14: Spot where several prisoners were drowned in the moat; 15: Hutments; 16: Stores; 17: Printing works; 18: Site where prisoners were burned alive.



Another view of the entrance to the fort with the moat bridge on the right. View looking north-west. (IWM)



The fortress system at Liège held out under bombardment for ten days; Namur for five. By August 20, German troops were marching through Brussels. As the Germans swept southwards across Belgium, King Albert successfully withdrew his army north-westwards, ending up around Antwerp. Besieged there by a German covering force, various sallies were attempted by the Belgians, including those at Breendonk by the 12th Infantry Regiment.

In the German rear to the south, the French fortress at Maubeuge succumbed after a fortnight on September 8, and on the 28th it was

the turn of Antwerp's outer defences to come under bombardment. Fort Breendonk received its first hit on October 1, being fired upon by Austrian 305mm howitzers, well out of range of its own guns, from the neighbourhood of Hombeek, some two miles away. By the evening of October 9, German patrols had fought their way into Antwerp, though not before rearguard forces (assisted by a British Naval and Royal Marine Force sent over to help the city hold out) had enabled King Albert's army to withdraw south-westwards to the River Yser, on the Anglo-French left, thus entering the general Allied line which in the

ensuing stalemate was to run from the Channel coast to the Swiss border for the next four years of trench warfare.

Fort Breendonk surrendered on October 9. In the Austro-German attack to wrest Antwerp, 563 shells landed on the fort from the 1st onwards, the fort's commander, Capitaine François Weyns, being killed, and its guns helped to hold back the German Marine Division. Within a year or so, its new occupants were engaged on repairs and rearmament.

After the First World War, the usefulness of the fort in any future conflict was inevitably called into question. In 1938, Fort Breendonk was adapted as an infantry base, and in January 1940 it was decided to equip the fort and three other defence points as a GHQ in the event of war. The place was camouflaged and vital communications installed.

On the morning of May 10, 1940, when the Germans once more violated Belgium's neutrality with their invasion of the Low Countries, King Leopold III, as head of the nation's armed forces, arrived at the fort to install himself at his command post (though he spent the nights at Lippelo Castle, a couple of miles away). Advance elements of the headquarters staff were already there. A British liaison officer established himself at the fort; a French liaison section moved into a nearby post.

It was from the fort that King Leopold broadcast to the nation on May 10, and three days later to his troops. As events unfolded, visitors to Breendonk included the Belgian Prime Minister, Monsieur Pierlot; the Foreign Minister, Monsieur Spaak; and the Minister



View looking towards the north-east corner of the fort; the presence of the moat made escape all the more impossible. (IWM)



After exercise, some of the Belgian detainees are halted inside the gateway. (IWM)



This was the last view many a prisoner would have had of the outside world if he dared to glance back over his shoulder. (IWM)

of Defence, General Denis. At the fort the King received the French XVI Corps commander, General Fagalde; General Giraud, the commander of the French Seventh Army (to which the corps belonged) which advanced into Belgium to take up positions on the King's left; General Lord Gort, the commander of the BEF which came up on the right; General Corap, whose French Ninth Army likewise moved forward into Belgium with the French First and Second Armies; and General Billotte, the French Army Group A commander and (from May 12-21) co-ordinator of the northern armies.

From the fort the King ordered his troops to fall back on a line Antwerp-Louvain (Leuven) after the Germans penetrated along the line of the Albert Canal. With the Allied withdrawal in the wake of the German breakthrough at Sedan, on May 16 the Belgium Government moved from Brussels to Ostend. Around midnight the Chief of the General Staff left the fort, and the following afternoon the complete headquarters transferred to Sint-Denijs-Westrem, near Ghent. That afternoon the Germans entered the capital. Ten days later, the French and British forces having been cut off with the Belgians by the panzers' advance to the sea at Calais, as the BEF fought its way back towards Dunkirk, King Leopold sued for an armistice and at midnight on the 27th surrendered. The Government, by then in London, dissociated itself from the King's decision, declaring itself the only legal Government and formally announcing its resolve to continue the war, but the Nazi occupation of Belgium was a fact.

Three months into the occupation, in August 1940, the German District Commander at Mechelen (Malines) ordered the little community of Breendonk to furnish the fort for 200 inmates. The community were to provide small benches, feeding utensils, bunks, blankets and straw mattresses, one of the stipulations being that everything had to be ready by not later than September 1. The order was signed Rittmeister von Maercker, Kreiskommandant V.

On September 20, SS-Sturmbannführer Philip Schmitt received his first batch of prisoners, numbering fifteen. The appearance of the fort soon began to change as they were set to work on putting up a barbed wire perimeter fence and then on removing immense quantities of earth to uncover the underground buildings, thousands of tons of it, which were used to raise the ramparts and hide the place from the prying eyes of the outside world.

Sturmbannführer Schmitt was 38 when he became commander of the fort. Born at Bad Kissingen and a typical example of German youth, convinced of the superiority of Nazi



After passing over the moat, and through the main gate, prisoners entered this courtyard. (IWM) Bottom: These walls, frozen in time, bear silent witness to the past.

power and a fervent admirer of Hitler, he was a violent man and a heavy drinker. Schmitt came directly under Himmler's SS deputy, in charge of the Gestapo in Belgium and Northern France, Standartenführer Constantin Canaris (not to be confused with Admiral Wilhelm Canaris), and also under the military power in Belgium, headed by the Military Governor, General von Falkenhausen. The Military Governor was a man who might perhaps best be described as a monarchical country squire, not very Hitler minded, with a penchant for a life of luxury who was very much interested in China, where he had lived for many years. Schmitt was assisted by SS-Untersturmführer Arthur Prauss from Charlottenburg, a former camp guard at Sachsenhausen Oranienburg, and thus an old hand at the business. It was Prauss who organised the workforce. He loved to play the soldier, blowing his whistle and bellowing, and displaying towards the prisoners a combination of harshness and — at the outset, that is — fatherly-like concern. From October 1940 until August 1944 it was Prauss who in handling the day-to-day running of the place was lord and master where discipline was concerned.

Gradually the number of prisoners increased and by November 1940 it had reached more than fifty. A different form of organisation was then required. The inmates were divided up among rooms containing a maximum of thirty-two under the supervision of a platoon leader or 'Zugführer'. One of the Zugführers, a Berlin Jew by the name of Walter Obler, was appointed foreman or 'Obervorarbeiter' together with a German Communist, Willy Giersch.

The prisoners had to endure their removal from society, especially separation from their loved ones, but, in spite of the hard work and strict Prussian discipline, the regime at that stage was still bearable. They had to get up at six in the morning and work eight hours a day. Early on, they received much the same sort of rations as ordinary Belgians outside, though obviously their diet was restricted to only what was on the ration. Morning and evening meals consisted exclusively of bread and some lard. To drink, there was a liquid made from an extract of roasted acorns. At midday, each prisoner was entitled to two bowlfuls of soup. On Sundays, they received a piece of meat and a few potatoes, and those who had worked extremely well were rewarded with extra spare time and received a cigarette from Schmitt. Saturday afternoons they were allowed off. For this was 1940: the Nazi occupation of Belgium had not started to bite. The Third

Reich basked in the euphoria of victory across the Continent and SS personnel at the camp were very few: a major, a lieutenant and a corporal. Organised resistance in Belgium did not as yet exist. After the fall of Belgium, the Germans had adopted a friendly stance and they were full of praise for the brave defence put up by the Belgian Army. The first signs of disillusionment for the invaders had come with the Battle of Britain. In Belgium, times had begun to change. Civilian resistance and unofficial civil service go-slows, refusals by magistrates to carry out German orders, the refusal of universities to submit lists of students for forced labour, general discontent — all soon compelled the Germans to take a firmer line. Round-ups for the German labour camps increased tacit opposition and in turn provoked more brutal measures by the Gestapo.

Nazi trial procedure in Belgium was simple: when an article of the penal code was violated, the accused was heard, condemned and imprisoned or executed. Where there was insufficient proof or a lack of concrete evidence, those who were considered dangerous or suspect were put into 'Schutzhäft' — protective custody. In typical totalitarian fashion, though, incarceration at a concentration camp or somewhere such as Auffangslager Breendonk did not necessarily follow conviction or sentencing. Some prisoners remained at the fort for three years,

others for only a day. Virtually all the various concentration camps in Germany and elsewhere contained prisoners who at one time were imprisoned at Breendonk.

The first mass deportation via the camp was in September 1941. It was during the period following the German invasion of the Soviet Union and took place as part of Operation 'Sonnenwende', whereby large numbers of Belgians of Russian origin, Communists, and even Socialists, were arrested. Those for deportation — Communists and others — were segregated from the rest of the inmates and dispatched to Neuengamme near Hamburg. Other deportations were soon to follow.

The camp regime had started to deteriorate since early 1941. Rooms were separated into three sections: two for Jews and one for Aryans. Meat and potatoes on Sundays were abolished. All the food except for bread went into one large cauldron, creating a watery soup, with the thick part at the bottom becoming the centre of interest for every prisoner — distribution being one of the most important privileges of the Zugführer. During the initial period, many inmates were black marketeers; now, more and more political prisoners began to arrive.

In the middle of February 1941 an elderly German Jew was one of those who happened to be sent to the camp. The man suffered from asthma and could hardly push his wheelbarrow, and on his second day of hard labour — February 17 — he had to take a rest and sat on his barrow. Walter Obler, Zugführer and Vorarbeiter of Room 1, grabbed him by the collar and locked him up. At evening roll-call, one prisoner was missing. The first death at Fort Breendonk had taken place. The war had a long way to go, and many more were to follow — victims of exhaustion, maltreatment and malnutrition.

One Saturday afternoon — June 23, 1942 — a prisoner called Lurt was manoeuvring a barge loaded with hay from one side of the moat to the other. On top of the central dome stood a Wehrmacht guard. Rumour had it that the guard was drunk and suspected Lurt of making an attempt to escape. Whatever, he took aim and killed the man. The first execution had taken place. The corpse was displayed in the centre of the inner courtyard. At ten in the evening, all the prisoners had to file past it and a warning was issued that any attempt to escape would end in the same way.

In September 1941 several Belgian SS volunteers wearing SD patches on their uniforms arrived at the fort. This was a severe blow for many an imprisoned patriot. Being maltreated by the German SS, the enemy, was one thing, but by one's own countrymen. . . . They behaved fairly well at the outset but very



soon excelled their German colleagues for cruelty. Most infamous were Fernand Wijss and Richard Debodt (an ex-boxer and a former lock-keeper), who vied with one another in inventing the most refined tortures. One of the brutes greeted new arrivals with something like, 'This is hell and I'm the devil!' Schmitt and Prauss were fanatics, and so too were other German SS members — Lais and Humpert, to name but two.

The garrison at Mechelen provided Wehrmacht troops for guard duties, and some of these soldiers were no longer young and not as enthralled with Nazi ideology as they once might have been. More than once they sided against German and Belgian SS guards to protect prisoners from excesses and were sometimes on friendly terms with them. The Wehrmacht guards allowed things which normally were forbidden by the SS, but even the friendliest of them was obliged to roar and be brutal from time to time, for they too were kept an eye on and were of course liable to punishment for fraternisation.

The privileged position of Zugführer was not an easy one, for he was responsible for order, tidiness and apportioning duties. A Zugführer possessed a degree of authority with which he could help his comrades. He could put in a word, for instance, when a room mate had to go to the sick-bay. He also acted as foreman during work and was in a position to allocate jobs in the way he wanted things done. To be a Zugführer required strong nerves, a tough disposition, but, above all, a good deal of luck. A Zugführer had a lot of control but there always was a risk of his losing this enviable position. A good Zugführer was able to get his way with those both above and beneath him. It was important that he possessed the confidence of the SS guards and at the same time found a way of treating his fellow prisoners as leniently as possible, without ever losing his patience. Some did very well in the beginning but gradually became harsh and cruel because in the long run their nerves could not stand it any more. Broken promises of freedom were often behind such changes in behaviour. The clumsiness of prisoners made them lose their temper because they were held responsible and risked being punished, or, worse, lose their privileged status. A dismissed Zugführer was made into a scapegoat for the SS by the prisoners, and it became extremely dangerous to be on friendly terms with such a man. Some Zugführers were real heroes who did what they could to protect their comrades; where the reverse was the case, many of them were to be arrested and brought to trial after the war.

A depressing atmosphere pervaded the rooms. Inmates had to be wary of weaker members of the camp population as there was



Part of the perimeter fence seen here after the camp's liberation in 1944, guarded by a Belgian army man, armed with a Kar 98K Mauser rifle. (IWM)

always a possibility of an informer in the group. The presence of convicted criminals guilty of anything but patriotism unsettled morale. Criminals dealt with by the Belgian judicial system were intermingled with 'normal' Breendonk inmates to sow distrust. In many cases, criminals looked upon political prisoners as stupid bastards and tried to exploit the fanatical hatred of SS guards against members of the Resistance, anti-Fascists, Jews and hostages. In the face of the harsh discipline, those with a firm belief in God possessed the hope and comfort of their faith; for many patriots, though, it was enough to be sustained by the belief that their suffering was in the service of a worthy cause, that of ultimate victory, when their torturers would have to pay for their crimes. A strong constitution was a prime necessity to have a chance to survive. By itself, however, it was not enough. Immense inner resources were vital in order to withstand the oppression, which could lead to utter despair and suicide.

Every prisoner had to behave as an underling in the presence of a German. When a German spoke, prisoners had to stand to attention. A German had the right to demand absolute and immediate obedience and any hesitation was considered rebellious. Every inmate was considered a convict and therefore had his head shaved. Rest was not allowed during work, and permission was required to relieve oneself which was not always granted.

For the prisoners' main task of shifting the earth and uncovering the fort their tools consisted of broken-down shovels and pick-axes, wheelbarrows and later Decauville tip carts — primitive means which made it brutally hard work, especially at the high speed required by the guards. The efficiency of different groups was often made the subject of competition while officers and guards made bets. When a German entered a room everyone had to jump to their feet immediately and stand to attention at the foot of their bunks. Before meals sometimes, after a long day of dirty work, prisoners had to present their hands for inspection to ensure that they were spotless. Before and after work roll-call was held in the inner courtyard, during which the whole camp had to stand perfectly at attention; anyone who failed to do so risked a beating. Prisoners were not allowed any personal possessions apart from the most basic toilet requisites. Newspapers and books were strictly forbidden.

The day began with the prisoners having to clean out their rooms and make their beds — and it began in summer at 4.00 a.m. The bed-making routine — 'Bettenbau' — meant making sure that the straw mattress was as smooth and straight as a plank of wood. The blankets had to be folded exactly in time-honoured fashion. Bed-making was an endless source of frustration, and those who were not very good at it were constantly persecuted. Some who were not able to get the hang of 'Bettenbau' simply snapped; others who were regularly punished for their hapless attempts languished slowly away. Punishment happened all too frequently for the slightest reason and could take any number of forms, among them: having to stand for a long time on the same spot, or squat down with arms outstretched while holding a pickaxe, or being made to do hard labour with a knapsack heavily loaded with bricks on one's back, or being made to run, lie down, jump up, run, etc. . . . Reasons for punishment were invented by the dozen. Those who declared themselves sick in the morning were visited by Prauss and he decided who was sick or not.

Casemates were damp and chilly. Condensation dripping from the walls formed pools of water on the floors in the morning. The walls became mildewed. Towels never dried completely, even with a stove burning in the room. The inmates wore old Belgian Army uniforms from which rank and unit badges had been removed and which bore distinctive markings on chest and back: a yellow stripe for Jews; white for Aryans. In the centre of the stripe a red patch denoted political prisoners,



a yellow one people caught smuggling food out of the countryside and into the towns for sale on the black market. As time went on, many more symbols were devised to better identify terrorists, Anglophiles, and so on. Below the patch, prisoners wore their number, for once they entered Breendonk this became their sole identity. In the early days, Belgian Army boots were available and distributed. After that, prisoners had to wear clogs. Underwear was not sufficient during winter and empty cement bags were used to improvise a kind of undershirt. Of course, this was not allowed and considered cheating and therefore severely punished.

The scarcity of food by the end of 1942 was such that a German doctor reported 101 cases of dropsy among the 300 inmates. More and more prisoners died. The situation was known about outside the fort and brought a protest from the Belgian Red Cross which offered to provide more food, but the offer was declined. Provisions left behind at the fort by Red Cross delegates, in an attempt to provide something for the prisoners, were thrown to the pigs beneath the very eyes of the starving men. A file discovered after the war in the Gestapo archives contained a written order signed by Craushaar, vice-chief of the 'Verwaltungsstab' — the civil administrative affairs staff of the military power. It was dated August 23, 1942, and read: 'Something has to be done regarding the prisoners at Fort Breendonk. During a recent inspection of the camp, I noticed that almost every prisoner is in a bad state of malnutrition. This situation must be improved in the interests of the reputation of the Military Command for Belgium and Northern France. It is important that something be done about it quickly, especially as the population of the camp is constantly increasing and consists of many Aryans.'

From time to time, relatives were allowed to send food parcels, and thanks to the intervention of the Belgian Red Cross and its President, who contacted the Military Governor, von Falkenhausen, additional food was provided. The Belgian Secretary General of the Ministry of Justice told his opposite number at the Belgian Ministry of Economic Affairs about the starving prisoners, and the latter drew the attention of the Nazi Economics Minister, Funke, and the Foreign Labour Minister, Sauckel, to their plight, with photographs which showed the wretched state they were in. Persistent urging resulted in the military authorities agreeing to allow in supplementary rations offered by a charitable foundation (the 'Leopold III Home') starting on September 14, 1943. Unfortunately, controlling the parcels was an opportunity for some Germans to steal from them. From April 1, 1944 rations were again reduced and by the end of the month German military doctors had to request that nutrition be



Alleged collaborators detained in 1944 suffer the humiliation of standing outside their cells for photographs. Note the battered enamel chamberpot! (IWM)



Today, chamberpot, prisoners and suffering have all gone, replaced only by silence.



A group of Belgian officers chat in a brightly lit corridor, somewhat gloomier today despite the original lighting. (IWM)



This ominous pile of somewhat crudely built coffins was discovered in the fort soon after its liberation and photographed by Sergeant Hardy on September 19. (IWM)



The same site today, still recognisable in spite of the removal of the left hand wall.

improved. Their answer came from the Gestapo chief Standartenführer Canaris on June 13. His reply made out that most of the prisoners had already been transported to the Reich; that those remaining at the fort were well taken care of, and that he considered it unnecessary to take any action for the moment.

Clandestine correspondence existed with the help of Belgian civilians working at the fort. Sometimes, sympathetic German soldiers helped smuggle out letters; alternatively, there was a stiff price to be paid upon delivery. The most unlikely sorts of paper were

used. Answers returned mostly via the same way. Of course, this activity was not without risk. For instance, civilian bricklayers working at the fort were sometimes searched, and, if they happened to be carrying anything out, they were locked up in solitary confinement until interrogation. Once, some of them were detained at the fort for a week and during work they bore a notice on their backs 'Ich habe briefe geschmuggelt' — I smuggled letters.

In the hope of putting down opposition, the use of prisoners as hostages became common practice for the occupation forces, and several

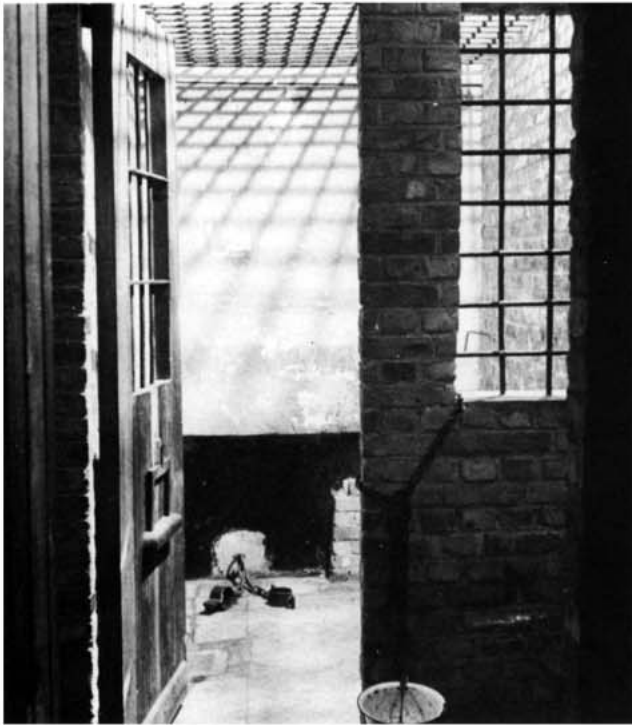
times between 1942 and 1944 the Gestapo executed ten prisoners for every German killed by the Resistance. The tragedy of reprisals was referred to in a nationwide appeal made by the General Secretaries of Belgium's civil administration in December 1941, in which they called upon everyone with the interests of the nation at heart to help put an end to the 'acts of those who without thought for the consequences are bent on driving Belgium into a state of blood and terror'. Similarly, in January 1943 the Head of the Roman Catholic Church in Belgium, the Archbishop of Mechelen, Cardinal Ernest van Roey, issued a pastoral letter to be read out from the pulpit of every church demanding an end to acts of violence as unjustified in view of the damage they wrought to the fabric of society, the harsh consequences and the danger of harsher ones to come. All to no avail. Resistance activity steadily increased and the death toll went on rising; and always there lurked the prospect of the Germans imposing a far tougher civil administration.

At the fort, whenever executions were about to take place as reprisals, the day's work was cancelled and the prisoners were confined to their rooms — these, then, were ominous signs. Ten posts were erected in front of a mound and the prisoners designated for execution were taken away. Usually no more than about an hour remained to them in which to prepare themselves for death. Permission was granted to write a few last words to relatives but not one of these letters ever arrived at its destination. Executions were not always by firing squad. In some cases the condemned were hanged.

During 1943 and the first two months of 1944, there were 1,174 attempts against members of collaborationist groups such as Rex, which resulted in 740 dead. These attempts took place mostly in the provinces of Liège and Luxembourg. Brussels and the provinces of Antwerp, and East and West Flanders were often the scene of attacks against members of the German-Flemish workers' association 'De Vlag' (Deutsch Vlämische Arbeitsgemeinschafft). Several such attempts were quite spectacular. In one, on April 7, 1943 at 6.30 p.m., Paul Colin, a well-known journalist and head of a pro-Nazi newspaper and weekly magazine, was hit by three bullets as he left his office in Brussels. He died the same night. His companion, Gaston Beekman, tried to reach for his pistol but was killed instantly by a single shot. At the funeral ceremony in the Palais des Beaux Arts at Brussels, the homily was spoken by the Rex organisation's founder and SS lieutenant, the Belgian Leon Degrelle. Colin's killer was a young member of the 'Front de l'Indépendance'. He and his two accomplices were arrested on May 3, 1943, tried on the 6th and hanged at Fort Breendonk on the 12th. According to witnesses, their final agony was increased since the German hangman used a thick rope, and one took eight minutes to die after the trap had opened.

Some 200 or so prisoners were executed at Fort Breendonk, of whom by 1983 the names of 187 had been established. The actual number of those who died in the course of events at the camp is not known but according to a booklet published by the Fort Breendonk Memorial Institute 53 per cent of all the prisoners at or who passed through the camp did not survive the war. Another publication mentions a figure of more than 300 as having died from all the various causes.

An ancient powder magazine in the fort was transformed into a torture chamber, where during the night prisoners were brought to be interrogated. They had to undress and with hands tied behind their backs were hoisted from the ground by a pulley. Torture lasted until all the information they could give was obtained or until they lost consciousness. Other torture gadgets served to crush fingers or the head and included electrode needles



One of the smaller cells seen here in 1944 — note the short length shackles and the ever present chamberpot! (IWM)



A Belgian army officer stands in the doorway of the torture chamber — a converted powder magazine. (IWM)

and the use of a red hot iron bar. The SS and Gestapo were well aware of how barbarous their methods were, for when Fort Breendonk was evacuated all traces of the torture chamber and torture implements were removed.

Late in the war, court sessions were held at the fort. One of the SS canteens was arranged as a courtroom where special cases were dealt with and emergency verdicts pronounced and immediately put into effect. Not much is known of such trials, but one involved a Belgian, Lieutenant Marcel Demonceau, who attempted to escape at Christmas 1944 and was sentenced to death and executed at the fort. The outcome of another of these trials was the hanging of twelve members of the French Resistance in groups of three, while their comrades were made to watch and were advised to tell where they had hidden parachuted agents.

Many prisons and camps in occupied territory and the Rhineland were evacuated in May 1944. Hitler expected an invasion and since he could not place his entire trust in the Atlantic Wall, he had plans to build a defensive line behind the Rhine. Fort Breendonk was evacuated on May 6, 1944, exactly one month before the Allies landed in Normandy, the prisoners being taken to German camps.

Meanwhile, in July 1944, the SS took over in Belgium, and Gauleiter Grohé replaced von Falkenhausen. All non-avowed pro-Nazi elements were removed from their commands and several arrests were made. During the final weeks of the occupation, the Resistance had a hard time and Breendonk was again filled with prisoners. They came in for terrible treatment. The string of German defeats served to stimulate the guards in their hatred and cruelty. Discipline was at its worst. Sixty inmates died from hardship during the six weeks before liberation and another forty were executed.

On August 31 all the prisoners had to clamber aboard buses and were ordered to sit on the floor and keep their heads down so that they could not see where they were being taken. They were set down at Vught, in Holland, and from there were transported to various German camps. When, on September

4, British tanks advanced to Antwerp and passed Breendonk, the last Germans had left the fort that morning. After the liberation, the fort was used for a while to confine collaborators.

Soon after receiving their freedom, a few survivors of Fort Breendonk did everything possible to reveal to the public what had happened there during the German occupation and placed themselves at the disposal of the Belgian courts for an investigation to make sure that the brutes and killers of Breendonk received their just deserts. The first to be arrested was a former Belgian prisoner, Fernand Daumeries, who had betrayed his fellows and behaved inhumanly. He was brought to trial at Charleroi and sentenced to death on November 20, 1944.

Several ex-prisoners who had ill-treated their fellows were arrested, as were civilian workers who had betrayed inmates.

A Commission for War Crimes was set up by the Government and began investigations. On November 20, 1945, Sturmbannführer Schmitt was recognised in a Rotterdam prison and taken back to Fort Breendonk. The infamous Zugführer Walter Obler was arrested in Vienna on the same day. Schmitt could not stand trial immediately, however, as there were no provisions under Belgian law relating to German war criminals, i.e. enemy subjects in uniform, in time of war, who had committed crimes against civilian nationals. The last arrest took place in 1950 when the Belgian SS man Richard Debodt, disguised in a French uniform, was arrested in Germany.



The preserved interior of the torture chamber today. The Gestapo had attempted to remove all evidence of the room's former use. Note the pulley hanging from the ceiling, used to suspend a victim by his hands tied behind his back.



Persons suspected of being collaborators rest on their bunks whilst awaiting trial. (IWM)



Prisoners' canteen preserved today, complete with traditional enamel utensils and barrack-style stove.



Rail-mounted tipper trucks rest where the last shovelfuls of earth were deposited.

The cases dealt with in early 1946 at Mechelen concerned the notorious Belgian SS guards, a few Belgian civilian workers, and some ex-prisoners. First and foremost among the accused was Fernand Wijss. One of the indicted was Valère Devos, an ex-prisoner who had in fact already been liquidated by fellow inmates at Buchenwald for what he had done at Breendonk. Court sessions began at the City Hall of Mechelen on March 5, 1946. More than 400 witnesses were heard. Unimaginable testimony was offered of the bestial behaviour of those in authority at the fort. One of many unforgettable instances concerned the Brussels postmen who were arrested by the Gestapo in September 1942 and imprisoned there after being accused of intercepting letters from informers addressed to the Gestapo, which had enabled many a person to disappear and hide, avoiding arrest, torture, and in some cases, execution. These postmen were particularly ill-treated at the fort. When their evidence was being heard on March 8, during which they made known in detail to the court the brutality and torture they had undergone and the crimes they witnessed against other prisoners, one of the postmen explained how a Belgian SS man, Raes, buried a Jew alive. Another witness told of how Belgian SS man, Van Born, ill-treated Resistance members. Fernand Wijss was seen to have caused the violent death of several postmen, and at one point he got up from his seat and retorted that he was the victim of a conspiracy whereby witnesses had got together amongst themselves to fake a mass of overwhelming evidence against him. This allegation from Wijss created a storm of protest. One postman lost control of himself and charged towards the former SS guard to administer rough justice there and then. While a shaken public looked on, Belgian gendarmes surrounded Wijss to protect him. One of the witnesses explained how it was impossible to recollect all the many evil deeds Wijss had committed. He could recall how in March 1943 Wijss had killed five Jews in one afternoon, and held him responsible for the deaths of four postmen. A police superintendent imprisoned at Breendonk testified how he witnessed Vermeulen kill a Jew with a spade. Turning to Wijss and Debodt in the courtroom, he accused them of having beaten a youngster half to death and of having buried him alive. When the youth cried for his mother, the superintendent testified, Debodt threw a spadeful of earth in his victim's mouth. On another occasion, a sick inmate had dumped his excreta out of a window; when Wijss heard about it, he had forced the offender to eat it under the eyes of his assembled room mates.

Among the main witnesses at the trial was Monseigneur Gramman, chaplain during the occupation for the Brussels prison of Saint Gilles and the camp at Breendonk. He explained how he had implored the Military Governor, General von Falkenhausen, to intervene against the bestial treatment of the inmates at Breendonk. But the General himself was under pressure from Berlin. An order from the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, dated Berlin, May 5, 1942, urged him and his command to act more rigorously regarding crimes committed against the Reich, and this order served as a reminder of a directive dated December 7, 1941, signed by the OKW Chief, General Wilhelm Keitel. According to Monseigneur Gramman, when the twelve members of the French Resistance were tried at the fort, the proceedings began at 9.00 a.m., ended at 2.00 p.m., and resulted in their being hanged at 6.00 p.m. The chaplain described how he had to press for those who were still alive at the end of the rope some time afterwards to be finally put out of their agony with a bullet.

At the end of the hearings, the Auditeur Militaire demanded nothing less than the death penalty for twenty of the twenty-three accused. The legal arguments came to an end on April 12, 1946. On Tuesday, May 7, 1946, the members of the Military Court and the accused entered the City Hall of Mechelen for the last time. In the sumptuous surroundings, crammed with historical associations, in which the unforgettable proceedings had gone on for more than a month, judgment was about to be delivered. A large public and a strong force of gendarmes were present. All the accused looked pale and dispirited, except Van Born, who appeared confident on the strength of the favourable evidence of a number of witnesses. Van Hul, being ill, was absent. Devos and Debodt were sentenced in their absence — Devos killed at Buchenwald; Debodt yet to be arrested. Journalists, photographers and newsreel crews were all there, for this was an historic moment not to be missed. At 10.15 a.m. precisely, the War Tribunal entered, led by the President. When all its members were seated, it was as if a shiver of anticipation ran through the public



The execution posts in the fort are rarely without floral tributes.

in the courtroom, followed by a long silence. Then, the solemn, clear voice of the President pronounced the verdicts. Wijss, De Saeffel, Lampaert, Pellemans, Van Neck, Brusseleers, Raes, Van de Voorde, Van Praet, Carlier, Obler, Lewin, Herman, Debodt, Vermeulen and Devos were sentenced to death by firing squad. Bael, Van Hul, Cuyt and Vandermeersche were given life-sentences. Amelinck received twenty years hard labour and Schmandt fifteen. To loud applause from the public, Van Born was acquitted. Naturally, the condemned made use of their right of appeal and they later appeared in court at Brussels, where judgment passed by the War Tribunal at Mechelen was upheld.

Saturday April 12, 1947, was the date set for the condemned to pay the ultimate price for their crimes; the ignominious way in which they were to be despatched — by being shot in the back — being considered appropriate for what they had done. The executions took place at three different places at 6.30 a.m. Pellemans had previously already been condemned to death by a tribunal at Dinant for having been an active member of the

Gestapo, which was why he met his end at a deserted barracks there. Brusseleers, Vermeulen, Raes, Obler, De Saeffel, Van Praet, Lampaert, Lewin, Carlier and Praet were shot in the inner courtyard of a barracks at Mechelen. Fernand Wijss was shot at a deserted fort at Antwerp after accepting the ministrations of a priest. The Zugführer appointed a foreman along with Obler at the outset, the German Communist Willy Giersch, stood trial at Mechelen at a later date. Several witnesses appeared for his defence and he finally escaped with a light sentence.

German SS members such as Humpert, Müller, Lais and others were brought to Brussels for extensive interrogation, which for most resulted in no further action being taken on the basis of there being inadequate grounds to warrant them being considered as war criminals. One single German war criminal stood trial before the military court at Antwerp for inhuman behaviour at Breendonk. That was SS-Sturmabführer Philip-Johann-Adolf Schmitt, the camp commandant, though it was not until 1950 that he



Memorial to those killed defending the fort in World War I.



To those that died within the walls in WWII.



A Belgian officer salutes the spot where many of his countrymen were shot by the Gestapo at Breendonk. (IWM)

could be tried, once Parliament at last passed the necessary legislation concerning alleged German war criminals. Many ex-prisoners gave evidence against him; and his former superiors, such as General von Falkenhausen, Standartenführer Canaris and the Verwaltungsstab chief, General Reeder, all of whom would later stand trial in Brussels, were called into the witness box. Cynically, Schmitt denied every accusation of maltreatment, maintaining that he had acted in accordance with regulations and had been obeying orders. He was found guilty, sentenced to death, and executed at Antwerp — the only German war criminal to be executed by the Belgians. Untersturmführer Prauss and another German SS man, Obersturmführer Kantschuster, disappeared without trace.

Proceedings against General von Falkenhausen opened in Brussels on September 25, 1950. On his return to Berlin after being replaced in July 1944, von Falkenhausen had been held captive, accused of having been too lenient as Military Governor. After the war he was brought back to Brussels and confined at Saint Gilles prison — conditions there being so bad that a prominent Belgian personality presented himself at the gates to pay his respects and to offer to provide the prisoner with sheets. From Saint Gilles von Falkenhausen was transferred to Saint Léonard's prison at Liège — his forty-third place of captivity. His trial lasted fifty-nine days, and on March 9, 1951 he was sentenced to twelve years hard labour. When he was set free just over two weeks later, his total period in captivity almost equalled that of his tenure of command in Belgium. He died on July 31, 1966.

Standartenführer Constantin Canaris, 'Befehlshaber der SIPO und SD' for Belgium and Northern France, was arrested in Milan on April 30, 1945. A Belgian court gave him twenty years hard labour. He was released after serving seven years. The 'Verwaltungschef', General Eggert Reeder, like von

Falkenhausen, received twelve years hard labour, but he too was set free shortly afterwards and deported to Germany.

In 1945, a former prisoner called upon the Minister for War Victims to preserve the fort as a commemorative site. A few months later, a bill was put forward in Parliament by a Socialist representative, himself a former prisoner, to promote an independent public administration. The bill was supported by representatives of five different parties and unanimously accepted by Chamber and Senate. It was signed on August 19, 1947 by Prince Charles, Regent of Belgium, brother of the absent King Leopold III. An ad-

ministrative body was appointed on September 26 and in October 1947 the Fort Breendonk National Memorial Institute began its work — the prime objective being to preserve the place with its buildings and their contents as they were during the occupation as a reminder of what happened there; funds stemming from admission charges, the proceeds of a visitors' shop and an allocation from the national defence budget. Today, forty years after the last cruelties were enacted at Breendonk, the fort still receives a steady stream of visitors, its echoing corridors and empty rooms now a silent memorial to all those who suffered and lost their lives within its earthen ramparts.



Today, the scene is almost unchanged except for the growth of lush grass and a solitary bush — life springing from a place of death.

AFTER THE BATTLE PRESERVATION



RELICS OF THE RANGE

The fact that items used as targets on the Army's firing ranges on Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire include tank wrecks dating from the Second World War is quite well known. It is also fairly common knowledge that all of these wrecks are in a very sorry state indeed, most of them having no suspension or road wheels left, with quite a few of them being little more than piles of shot-up scrap protruding a few feet above the grass. Normally painted in bright, gaudy shades of orange, pink, red or yellow, as an aid to visibility, the wrecks can also perform quite a good impression of a Swiss Gruyère cheese! Imagine, then, the Army's delight, not to mention our amazement, when it was announced in the summer of 1985 that quite by chance, no less than six Churchill, one Cromwell and two Sherman tanks had been discovered and unearthed from a trench on the ranges in which they had been buried nose-to-tail in the early post-war years and the mid-1950s. Such a discovery came as a godsend to the hard-pressed range authorities, who had been forced to resort to somewhat Heath Robinson tactics to make the targets appear more tank-like . . . namely the addition of numerous forty-gallon oil drums to improve the 'tank's' silhouette. Thus, at precisely the right moment, nine almost perfect targets had, quite literally, appeared out of nowhere!

The fears of vehicle conservationists should be quelled somewhat by pointing out the fact that none of these tanks are of a particularly unusual or rare type. In addition to this, the tank museum at Bovington was given the opportunity to remove any items that enhance or facilitate progress on their restoration projects and exhibits on display.

At the time the tanks were buried, range policy was that when a particular target became tatty and had an overtly 'knocked-out'

look, then it was buried on site if for any reason it could not be returned to the workshops for remodelling. As targets were in plentiful supply at that time, tanks that today would appear much less the worse for wear than their modern counterparts were simply swept under the carpet, so to speak.

At the time of going to press, several of these recovered tanks have already been set out on the ranges, but before this was done, we had the chance to photograph these and other remains as a representative sample of the total of two to three hundred targets that constitute the 'Relics of the Range'.



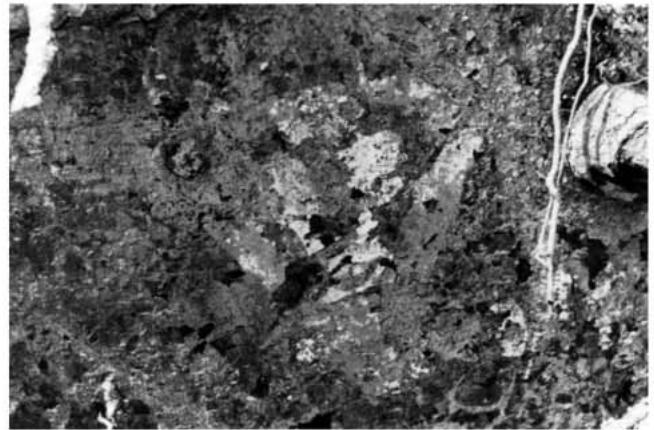
Top: Sherman and Churchill exhumed in the summer of 1985 at Battlesbury, Salisbury Plain. **Above:** Inverted turretless Churchill betrays the true condition of the relics — very poor indeed. The Bovington Tank Museum have removed any useful parts.



Technicians from the Army's Tank Museum at Bovington, prepare to remove the Rolls-Royce Meteor engine from the Cromwell.



Duplex Drive Sherman at Battlesbury Bowl, the armaments had already been removed before burial.



79th Armoured Division formation sign still visible on the front hull of one of the Churchills unearthed at Battlesbury.



Churchill complete with turret basking in the mid-morning sun at Battlesbury. Note again the lack of turret and hull guns.



Covenanter covered *left* and uncovered *right* at Imber Firs. These pictures depict just how difficult these vehicles were to see!



Mangled remains of duplex-drive Sherman that had been used on the ranges for several years — as is plainly evident!



Sherman and Centurion pair at Bishopstrow Down in much the same condition.



An unusual vehicle nearby is this Churchill bridgelayer, the boom of which is visible behind the Comet.



Battered Churchills, Cromwells and unidentifiables all painted a bright gaudy orange, as they are today on the ranges.



Saracen ambulance at Summer Down.



Nice-looking Daimler Armoured Car at Wadmans Coppice.



A real gem in the form of a German Pak 38 recovered by Major John Gillman for Bovington in August 1985.



Wellingtons at Hixton in February 1943. Remnants of BK347, in the foreground, still exist — in very different surroundings. (IWM)

WIMPEY INVESTIGATION

BY DAVID J. SMITH

Good panoramic views of wartime airfields are rare, chiefly because the demands of security generally forbade too much in the way of background features being shown. One of the best, taken from the roof of the control tower at Hixton airfield, near Stafford, is quite well known but few people are aware that parts of the Wellington aircraft in the foreground still exist. All her contemporaries were broken up for scrap after the war but BK347's remains can still be found on the Yorkshire mountain where she ended her days.

No. 30 Operational Training Unit at Hixton and its satellite aerodrome at Seighford (pronounced Syf'd) was one of many units turning out aircrews for the night bomber offensive. It had been formed on June 28, 1942 and operated a succession of Wellingtons of various marks up to the time of its disbandment in June 1945. (It had moved to Gamston in Nottinghamshire in February 1945.) The accident rate in training was very high, since many of the aircraft were retired front-line machines which were somewhat worn. Add to this the inexperience of the crews and long cross-country flights round the clock in all weathers to maintain the output for Bomber Command, and it is not surprising that this was so.

The Accident Record Card held by the Air Historical Branch for Wellington Mk III BK347 states that the aircraft flew into high ground at an altitude of 2,300 feet whilst on a day cross-country exercise on April 24, 1944, having taken off from the OTU's satellite at Seighford. It was 150 miles off track and was presumed to have descended through cloud to pinpoint its position. This was a common cause of wartime accidents when lost; the agonising decision to let down through cloud and hope that there were no obstructions, or else bale out and perhaps land in the sea. It

was possible to request homing bearings from ground stations but aircraft radios were often unreliable and sometimes completely useless.

The only survivor from the crew of seven was Sergeant Marks, the rear gunner, who sustained minor injuries and was treated at the Cumberland and Westmorland County Hospital at Kendal. One assumes that he was able to walk to the railway which crosses the moors about a mile away and seek help. Unfortunately, the Operations Record Book for No. 30 OTU does not quote his initials or service number so it would be difficult to trace his present whereabouts to give us the background to the story. Perhaps he was unlucky enough to be shot down over Germany at a later date.

The names of the fatal casualties were: Flying Officer E. M. Barrett (Pilot), Flight Lieutenant A. Alderson (Navigator), Sergeant P. E. Lomas (navigator), Pilot Officer R. G. C. Brodie (Air Bomber), Sergeant N. Skirrow (Wireless Operator/Air Gunner), and Sergeant R. C. Holmwood (Air Gunner).

The unit diary makes little of the accident apart from noting the crew's names, the aircraft serial number and location. This was not unusual in view of the appalling loss rates in OTU flying. That same month No. 30 OTU lost three other Wellingtons in crashes with a total of 14 killed. A further two were seriously



The somewhat cluttered airfield today, some seven miles north-east of Stafford.



The surface wreckage of BK347 as it is today. The large circular objects are the exhaust collector rings and engine front cowling.

damaged in ground incidents. During its three years of existence the OTU lost over 50 aircraft, resulting in more than 130 aircrew deaths and many serious injuries.

Mr R. E. Tonge, the present owner of the Hixon airfield site, was aware of its wartime history and when he saw the photograph he decided to commission artist Alan Preece to use it as the basis for an oil painting. This now hangs in his offices in the former first floor control room of the totally refurbished tower. The old technical site and hangars have now become an industrial estate but at least one of the runways is in excellent condition. A private owner flies a light aircraft from here and keeps it in a small building out on the airfield. Hixon was never a really satisfactory site for an airfield as it is ringed by low hills which claimed several of its Wellingtons.

There has always been some confusion as to the exact location of BK347's crash site. Some sources said Great Whernside, others Whernside, there being Wellington wreckage on and around both mountains. Despite the similar names, they are about 20 miles apart in Yorkshire. Finally, a wartime Ordnance Survey grid reference was converted to the modern equivalent and it was confirmed that BK347 was the wreck on Whernside.

In the summer of 1984 John Finch-Davies and myself went up to the aircraft, leaving the car beside the narrow road between Ingleton and Dent. (It is also possible to approach the mountain from the road to the south-east but the distance is considerably longer.) It is quite an easy climb and the impact point can be seen from the ridge, although it is several hundred feet down the other side at the bottom of a steep, grassy slope.

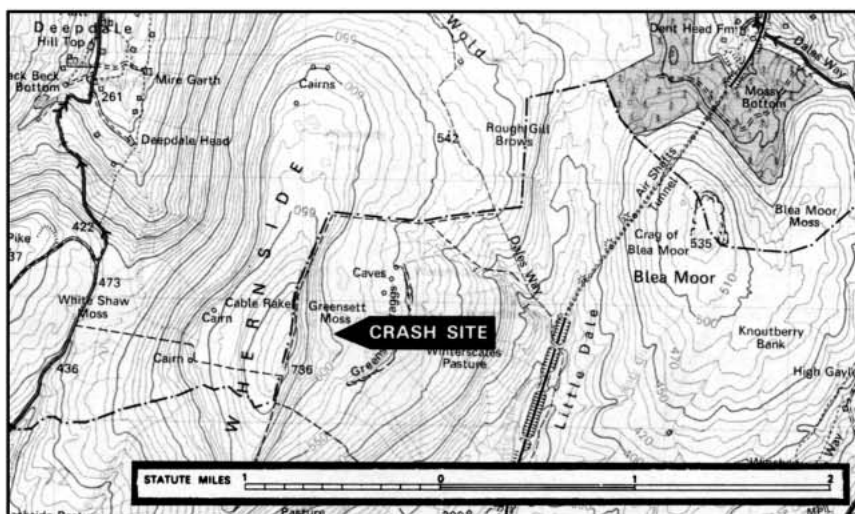
It is evident that there is a considerable amount of the Wellington buried in the peat, the biggest parts on the surface being both exhaust collector rings and pieces of the undercarriage legs. As fragments can be found higher up, it is likely that the salvage team from No. 60 Maintenance Unit man-handled the heaviest components to a place where a large pit could be dug to dispose of them. Unfortunately, the MU's records make

no mention of this particular job, only those of unusual difficulty being recorded. There are many sections of distinctive geodetic structure littered around, together with various small items of broken equipment. The engines probably lie in the hole dug by the salvage crew but any excavation would have to be done by hand owing to inaccessibility.

Wellington BK347 spent its entire career as a training aircraft, having been built at the Vickers-Armstrong shadow factory at Hawarden near Chester. It was delivered to No. 46 Maintenance Unit at Lossiemouth on October 2, 1942, who prepared it for service and stored it pending allocation to a unit. It then joined No. 30 OTU on December 30, 1942, the next move being to No. 13 MU at Henlow on January 21, 1944. This was probably for an overhaul as the aircraft returned to No. 30 OTU on February 7, only to be destroyed two months later.

On December 15, 1945, Barracuda DR306 crashed within a few hundred yards of the Wellington site. The pilot, Petty Officer J. R. Crevier, was only slightly injured and the wreck was simply left there. Unfortunately, it was recovered about twelve years ago by a Yorkshire wreck group who subsequently abandoned their plans to set up an air museum and, it is alleged, sold their collection for scrap. A 12-foot section of wing is all that remains today, which is a pity as it was undoubtedly once the most substantial wreck in Yorkshire.

We brought back some small geodetic sections for Mr Tonge so that they might be displayed with the painting. However, it is difficult to imagine that these sad corroded fragments were really part of this once fine aircraft, its wreckage still strewn on a remote hillside, never to make its way back to its long-since ploughed up and deserted airfield.



This extract from Ordnance Survey 1:50,000 Sheet 98 shows the crash site at Grid Reference 742817.

**AFTER THE
BATTLE**
IT HAPPENED HERE



The wreck of 'Gard', a 2ème Compagnie Renault of the 37ème BCC stands silent guardian over the graves of a French

chasseur and infantryman near Flavion. 'Gard' was knocked out on May 15, 1940, killing the entire crew. (Bundesarchiv)

THE ROAD ENDS AT DENEË

BY JEAN PAUL PALLUD

Early on the morning of May 10, 1940, the Wehrmacht marched into the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg, while the Luftwaffe attacked airfields, railway stations and the centres of communications. According to the plans formulated during the London Council of November 17, 1939 for 'Manoeuvre Dyle', the French Army and the British Expeditionary Force immediately entered Belgian territory to establish defensive positions along the line Antwerp-Louvain-Wavre-Namur-Sedan-Longuyon, adjoining the Maginot Line eastwards. The Groupe d'Armées A, commanded by General Gaston Billotte, became responsible for that part of the line from the North Sea to Longuyon; the French 7ème Armée was to hold the northern part of the line beyond Antwerp; the Belgian Army down to Louvain; the BEF on to Wavre; the French 1ère Armée as far as Namur; the French 9ème Armée down to Pont-à-Bar (six kilometres west of Sedan) and the French 2ème Armée to Longuyon.

In order to carry out delaying tactics in front of its sector between Namur and Pont-à-Bar, the 9ème Armée deployed three cavalry units — the 3ème Brigade de Spahis, the 1ère Division Légère de Cavalerie and the 4ème Division Légère de Cavalerie — on the eastern bank of the Meuse river along which the army was supposed to build its defensive line. However the advance of the panzer divisions of the XV. Armeekorps facing this sector was far more rapid than the Allied commanders had anticipated and General André Corap, the 9ème Armée commander, had to withdraw his advanced units earlier than planned.

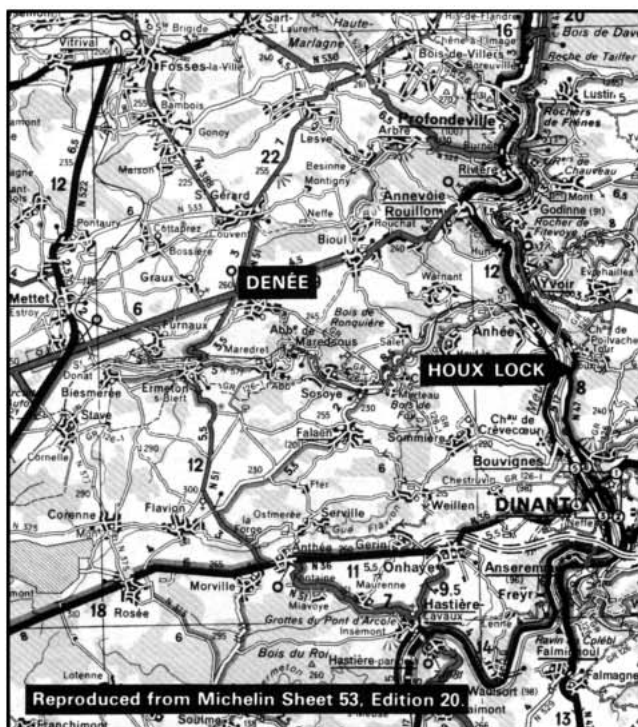
On May 12 the cavalry units were pulled back across the Meuse and the bridges blown. The railway bridge at Anseremme was demolished at 4.30 p.m. and a quarter of an hour later as the vanguards of the 7. Panzer-

Division, under the command of Hauptmann Horst Steffen, arrived at Dinant the bridges in that town were also blown. The same story applied at Yvoir as the advanced guard of the 5. Panzer-Division, under the command of Leutnant Heinz Zobel, approached the road bridge at about 5.45 p.m. only to see it destroyed by its defenders and drop into the river. (At this time the leading element of the

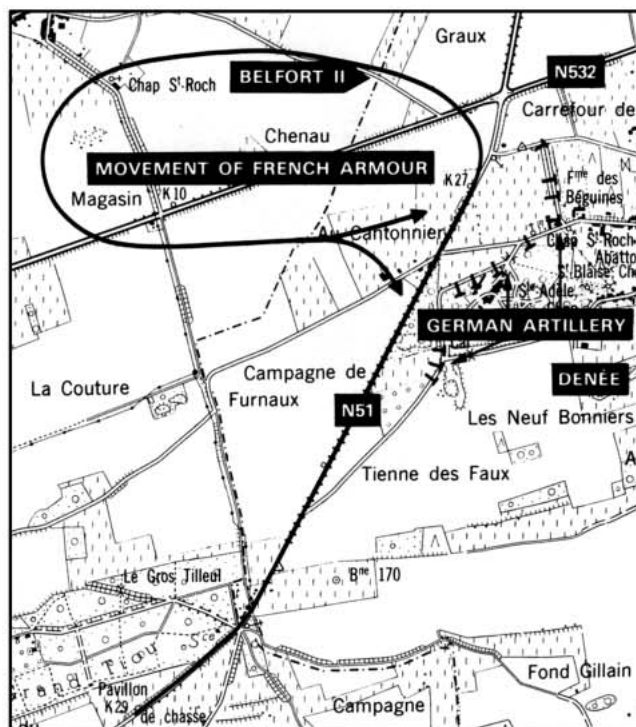
5. Panzer-Division, Kampfgruppe Werner, to which Leutnant Zobel's unit belonged, was subordinated to the 7. Panzer-Division.) The bridge at Profondeville was blown at 7.00 p.m. and the one at Hastière at 9.00 p.m.



To the Belgian housewife who seems to be asking 'And who is going to pay for my door?' the answer should be 'The German Army, Madame!' 'Var', a Renault B1 bis (No. 323) of the 2ème Compagnie, had to stop in the village of Ermeton because of transmission problems during the advance of May 14. The crew were unable to repair



Left: Rommel crosses the Meuse north of Dinant. Right: Movement of the 3ème Compagnie of 37ème BCC on May 15. After the initial skirmish during the morning, in which 'Amiral Guépratte' and 'Belfort II' were knocked-out, the company reorganised a few kilometres to the west and then re-engaged



the German positions indicated, from what is now the N51 road. Only three crewmen from the entire force rejoined French forces; sixteen men were killed and twenty-five were taken prisoner. The position where 'Belfort II' was knocked out is also indicated.

During the night of May 12/13, the first elements of Kampfgruppe Werner managed to cross the river at the Houx lock, four kilometres north of Dinant, soon followed by elements of the 7. Panzer-Division just north of the town. These bridgeheads were tenuous but French counter-attacks failed to eliminate them and the XV. Armeekorps consolidated its hold on the western bank during the day.

May 14

On the morning of May 14 Generalmajor Erwin Rommel, the commander of the 7. Panzer-Division, launched a bold attack westwards to capture Onhay, five kilometres west of the Meuse, but this advance came to a halt

west of the village when it came up against French positions. The French High Command, recognising the danger created by this breakthrough west of the Meuse, brought up an armoured division transferred from the 1ère Armée, the 1ère Division Cuirassée de Réserve, to support the threatened 9ème Armée. Alerted early that morning, the division was switched to the 9ème Armée shortly after midday and ordered to prepare to counter-attack towards Dinant with the 4ème Division d'Infanterie Nord Africaine. At 5.00 p.m. General Marie-Germain Bruneau, the division commander, was ordered to regroup his unit, which had moved to the Charleroi sector, into the area Ermeton-

Flavion-Corenne-Stave, some fifteen kilometres west of Dinant.

The 1ère DCR was composed of two Demi-Brigades of two battalions of tanks each and one battalion of motorised infantry:

1ère Demi-Brigade (Renault B1 bis medium tanks) under Colonel Jean-Marie Rabanit

28ème BCC under Commandant Louis Pinot

37ème BCC under Commandant Jean-Marie de Cisse

3ème Demi-Brigade (Hotchkiss H 39 light tanks) under Colonel Charles Marc

25ème BCC under Commandant Maurice Pruvost

26ème BCC under Commandant Pierre Bonnot

5ème Bataillon de Chasseurs Portés under Commandant Louis Perrodo

The strengths differ somewhat from one source to another but the 1ère DCR had some 160 to 180 tanks — around seventy Renault B1 bis with the 1ère Demi-Brigade and ninety or so Hotchkiss H 39 with the 3ème Demi-Brigade. On the other hand the German panzer divisions facing it had a numerical superiority of something like three to one: the 7. Panzer-Division having some 200 panzers and the 5. Panzer-Division a little more than 300. Nevertheless the Renault B1 bis that equipped the 1ère Demi-Brigade was a powerful weapon for its day. It was well armoured — 60mm on the front and sides of the hull and 56mm for the APX 4 turret sides — and well armed, with one 75mm ABS 29 gun in the hull, a 47mm SA 35 gun in the turret and two 7.5mm machine guns. However it weighed around 32 tonnes and although its engine had been boosted to 300 hp, this was mitigated by a reduced range. The Renault B1 bis was, on the other hand, slow and cumbersome and not designed for the mobility of the armoured warfare demanded by the German Blitzkrieg. It was the principal French medium tank in 1940 and a total of 365 were built (plus 35 Renault B1s) before the collapse in June 1940. It equipped eight Bataillons de Chars de

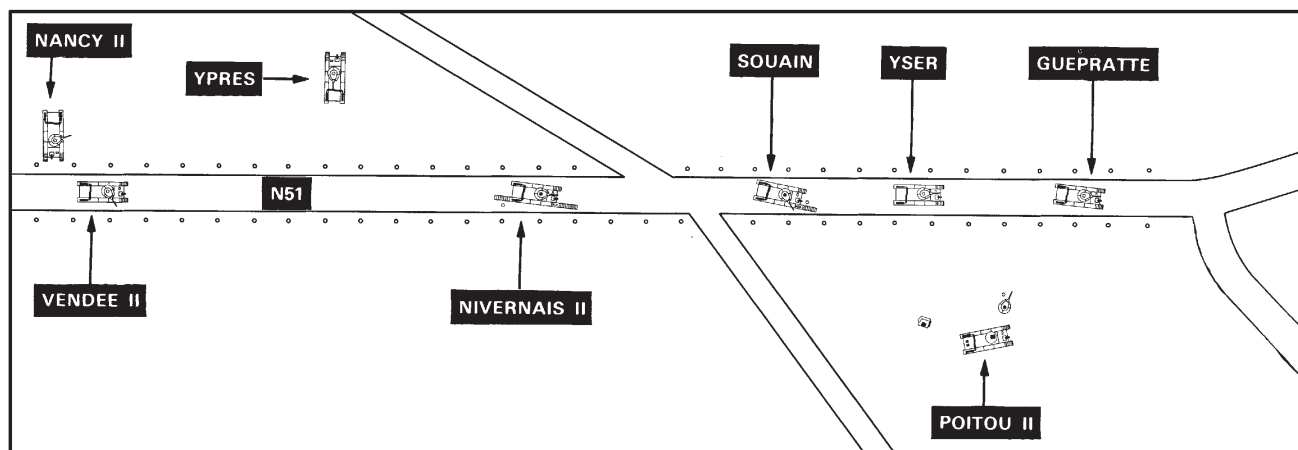


it and withdrew leaving the tank commander, Sous-Lieutenant De la Romignière, to guard it. During the German attack on May 15, he was picked up by his own forces. Damage to the house was caused when the Germans attempted to move the unwieldy vehicle with disastrous results! (Bundesarchiv)



This famous picture of a French tank crewman surrendering is in all probability a recreation for the camera several days later. When this Renault, 'Amiral Guépratte', was hit, Caporel-Chief

Roger Level, the driver, was killed and the other crewmen all wounded, two of them seriously. It is quite probable that the 'Frenchman' is a German stand-in. (Süddeutscher Verlag)



Above: Taken during the fighting by Heinz Fendesack, then a member of 8. Infanterie-Division, this photograph shows another Renault, 'Ypres' (No. 408), in flames in the field beside the road after a direct hit. Right: The fighting is over and two

Germans examine the wreck whilst a Ju 52 roars low overhead. The tank commander, Lieutenant Michel Duhourceau, and his crew from 1ère Section of 3ème Compagnie lie buried on the right. (ECP Armées)



Combat in May 1940: each battalion having three companies and a theoretical strength of 33 tanks.

The Renault B1 bis displayed a very elaborate set of markings: each tank bore its own number — on the bar just below the 75mm gun, on the access door on the right side of the hull and sometimes on the upper left corner of the rear hull plate — and its own name — on the hull front and on both sides of the turret. A national Tricolour was carried below the name on the hull front and beneath it on the right side of the turret. The commander of the 37ème BCC, Commandant de Cisse, was riding in Béarn II; the 1ère Compagnie was under the command of Capitaine Henri Raberin (Char Garonne), the 2ème Compagnie under the command of Capitaine Pierre Gilbert (Char Adour) and the 3ème Compagnie under the command of Capitaine Jacques Lehoux (Char Poitou II). Each company — ten tanks — was identified by a geometrical-shape emblem (a square for the first, triangle for the second, circle for the third) while each section of three tanks was identified by a letter and a playing-card symbol (spade, heart, diamond) placed on the company's geometrical shape. The company/section tactical sign was carried on both sides of the turret rear while the section letter was shown on the turret sides, at the rear of the hull sides and on both corners of the rear plate. In the 3ème Compagnie the three tanks of the 1ère Section were denoted by the letter T and a spade in the company circle, those of the 2ème Section by the letter U and a heart in the circle, and those of the 3ème Section by the letter X and a diamond in the circle. The Poitou II of the company commander was identified by the letter code 3C.

May 15

During the night the 1ère DCR moved its armour in order to try to block the emergence of the German panzers from the Dinant-Yvoir bridgehead. The 28ème BCC was at Flavion, just north of the main Dinant-Philippeville road (now the N36); the 25ème BCC was near Corenne and the 26ème BCC to the north-east of Flavion. The 37ème BCC was just south of another east-west main road (now the N532) near Ermeton. The position was tactically good but the fuel situation was very low and this was particularly grave for the units of the 1ère Demi-Brigade as the Renault B1 bis had a large, thirsty engine. Although the 37ème BCC received some more petrol on May 15 the 26ème BCC had to go without.

'Vendée II' (No. 468) and 'Nancy II' (No. 448 facing camera) were disabled south of Denée: both Renaults belonged to 3ème Section of 3ème Compagnie — displaying the section code letter X. 'Vendée II' was disabled when a shell killed the driver, Caporal-Chef Charles Camus, and seriously wounded the other two crewmembers; the tank commander, Lieutenant Baston, was wounded by another shell. 'Nancy II' was carrying three extra men in addition to the crew: Chasseur Armand Poulain, the driver of 'Ourcq', a 2ème Compagnie Renault disabled near Flavion earlier that day, and two crewmen from 'Belfort II' of the company's 2ème Section, knocked out north-west of Denée at the beginning of the afternoon battle. Three men were wounded when 'Nancy II' was hit; Chasseur Poulain was killed by an anti-tank shell and Sous-Lieutenant Alexandre Lecocq, the tank commander, was killed by a burst of machine gun fire. These civilians have just buried Chasseur Poulain, Caporal-Chef Camus and Sous-Lieutenant Lecocq. (ECP Armées)



By 8.30 a.m. the French tank crews noted panzers moving west near Anthée, just three kilometres west of Flavion. These were the leading elements of Panzer-Regiment 25 of 7. Panzer-Division. The French opened up to stop the advance and for a time they succeeded but the Germans, knowing that their panzers were inferior to the opposing French Renault B1 bis in a head on, tank-versus-tank battle, immediately began to move through the wooded area to the south to by-pass the French positions. The bulk of the panzers thus avoided a fight but the 7. Panzer-Division reconnaissance unit, the Panzer-Aufklärungs-Abteilung 37, that followed them maintained the pressure against the 26ème BCC and 28ème BCC while artillery guns were brought up into position. The French tanks hit hard and they disabled some panzers and guns but they were greatly hampered by lack of fuel

and, lacking mobility, they fell one by one under the German artillery barrage which soon opened up.

To the north the 37ème BCC was ordered to counter-attack the panzers from Panzer-Regiment 31, 5. Panzer-Division, which was moving west from the Houx bridgehead along the axis Sommière-Falaën and thus threatening to outflank the 28ème BCC. The 2ème Compagnie of the 37ème BCC which was leading the counter-attack hit the German vanguards hard but suffered heavily as a result. This is how Lieutenant Louis Bounaix, the leader of the company's 3ème Section, described the fight waged from his Char Guynemer:

'Hits rang against the armour on our left side but I could not identify our adversaries at first and I was searching to the south-east when my driver shouted, "There is a tank by



After 'Ypres' had stopped burning, the horror of the dead crew was revealed: among them the commander, Lieutenant Michel Dubourceau. The third crewman is out of sight behind the tank. (Bundesarchiv)

the edge of this wood!" It was a PzKpw IV and I targetted the 75mm gun. "Height 450" — too short . . . "Height 500" — too short again . . . "Height 550" — "We have got it!" There was a vivid red flash on the enemy's frontal armour and two or three men rolled down beneath nearby bushes. I realised then that our entire left flank was packed with German tanks but I could not see them clearly as they were motionless, camouflaged against the wood. With a flash of red, a shell pounded our armour, striking the side door which banged open. Chasseur Millard grasped it and kept it closed for the rest of the fight. Sergeant Reverberi, my driver, suddenly yelled to me, "Legac is here!" and half-opening the turret door I could see that this was so: Chasseur Legac was there, standing in the middle of this hellish ground! He was riding the Adour, the company commander's tank, and he told me that Capitaine Gilbert had been wounded and had appointed me to assume command. . . . We disabled another panzer, but then our troubles began. "The radiator's hit!" Whether by a shell, or by bolts sheared from the armour by a hit I did not know, but our radiator was pierced. Another shell hit the 75mm gun, jamming it into full recoil, but we kept firing with the 47. . . . We moved a little and by the edge of a wood I saw the Gard, its turret door open: through the aperture I could see the radio, Sergeant Waslet, revolver in hand. What had happened? I could only guess. . . . My right track was rattling very worryingly and my 47 gun had been worked so hard that the breech could not be closed because of the overheated oil in the recoil system. . . . We withdrew slowly.'

By 2.00 pm the 2ème Compagnie had been all but annihilated: of the seven tanks which had launched the attack, four had been disabled during the fight and the remaining three, Guynemer, Ourcq and Isère, were in such bad shape, with damaged engines or tracks and out of fuel and ammunition, that they had to be destroyed by their crew when they got back to the start line. The company commander, Capitaine Gilbert, had been killed by machine gun fire with most of his crew when getting out of his tank, the Adour, which burnt after being hit by artillery. The 1ère and 3ème Compagnies, which had carried out only flanking attacks and had accordingly suffered few casualties, were ordered north to the Mettet area by 4.00 p.m. The 3ème Compagnie was to move to Somtet, a village one kilometre south of Mettet.

To the south the 28ème BCC was nearing its end: most of its Renault tanks had run out of fuel and were now vulnerable targets. By 5.30

p.m., when the 28ème BCC received the order to move back on the Mettet-Florennes line, only ten B1 bis could actually be withdrawn. The 26ème BCC, which had only some twenty-five Hotchkiss left, withdrew towards Mettet while the 25ème BCC, which had suffered less, followed suit.

Denée, May 15 afternoon

The 3ème Compagnie started its move north at about 4.30 p.m. The column reached the main road (now the N51) south of Ermeton and the two leading tanks, Poitou II and Nivernais II, engaged and destroyed a German anti-tank gun which had challenged the column from a position some 200 metres east of the road. In Ermeton the tanks' progress was hampered by a small river without a suitable crossing-point, and instead of moving west towards Somtet as planned, the column headed northwards in order to reach the main road just north of Denée. Approaching this village the French tankers spotted groups of German infantry and attacked them. German guns immediately opened up. Amiral Guépratte, which was the last tank of the column, was hit and stopped west of the village. Belfort II was hit a few hundred metres further north and started to burn but,



After having noted any identification details (note the black notebook by the soldier on the left) and buried the bodies, the German detail arrange a pair of French tankers helmets on the graves. (ECP Armées)



'Nivernais II' (No. 467) was disabled just southwards of the little crossroads at Denée (which is off to the right). The right side of the Renault, facing the German batteries, has been badly damaged, one of the shots having struck a tree before the tank. The commander, Lieutenant Perrier, was wounded, the



rest of the crew escaping unhurt. Unit markings: a heart (barely visible), for 2ème Section, within a circle, for 3ème Compagnie, and the section letter U. 'Souain', 'Yser' and 'Amiral Guépratte' are down the road, today unchanged but for the removal of some of the trees. (ECP Armées)



in spite of being under fire from German infantry, the crew managed to put out the flames with fire extinguishers. Capitaine Lehoux led his remaining seven tanks some distance to the west, reorganised the company and launched an attack towards Denée. Facing them were the vanguards of the II. Bataillon, Infanterie-Regiment 28 (8. Infanterie-Division), which had crossed the Meuse at Yvoir and advanced westwards out of the bridgehead. A member of this unit has since described what happened:

'Tanks to the left. Friend or foe? They approached the battalion CP. They were French heavies of 32 tonnes with an impressive front and bearing a large white cross on the side. [This description applies to Vendée II and Nancy II of the company's 3ème Section, bearing the section letter X.] They moved from right to left parallel to the road. The situation deteriorated and our 3.7cm Pak could not pierce their armour. The first three [Vendée II, Nancy II, Ypres] arrived near us . . . stopped for a while then moved on to the left. Then things got even worse as they lined up along the road facing us. . . .'

With the situation critical for II. Bataillon, the division's artillery opened up and saved the day. When news of the French force arrived, Major Friedrich Filzinger, commander of the III. Bataillon of the division's Artillerie-Regiment 8, had been summoned urgently to his command post whereupon he hastily repositioned his batteries to counter the threat. The 10.5cm guns of Artillerie-Regiment 8, some anti-tank guns of the 14. Kompanie of Infanterie-Regiment 84 and



Left: 'Souain' (No. 707) was knocked-out a few hundred yards further north in a similar situation: again it is the right hand side of the vehicle that has suffered. One crewman was killed and the commander, Sous-Lieutenant Pourtal, and another crewman were wounded. The tank's 2ème Section letter U can be made out on the turret. Right: 'Yser' appears to be less damaged, but in fact the casualties were much higher: only one crewman escaped albeit wounded; the rest, including the tank commander, Sous-Lieutenant Georges Gossin, were all killed. 'Yser' belonged to the 1ère Section, and displayed the section letter T. 'Souain' and 'Nivernais II' are behind. (ECP Armées)





Capitaine Jacques Lehoux, commander of the 3ème Compagnie, was riding in 'Poitou II' (coded 3C) destroyed by a

violent explosion whilst crushing German foxholes. The piece of armour on the left is the engine decking. (ECP Armées)



Above: 'Poitou II' exploded after a German anti-tank shell pierced the turret. (Bundesarchiv) Right: 'Mort pour la France.' The parents of Jacques Lehoux requested that their son's grave



in Denée cemetery be left untouched; all the other fifteen French casualties were exhumed in 1949 and the remains re-interred in their local churchyards.



'Amiral Guépratte', behind which the probable re-enactment took place, was disabled about one hundred yards further north, probably during the first advance. Belonging to the 1ère



Section, it bears the code letter T in addition to the company circle/section spade symbol. The wreck of 'Poitou II', the mount of Capitaine Jacques Lehoux, is behind. (Bundesarchiv)

others of Panzer-Jäger-Abteilung 8, plus anti-aircraft guns from the 1. Kompanie of a Flak-Regiment — all of them opened up at very short range against the French tanks and within a few minutes the seven remaining Renaults had been disabled. Along with the nine tanks lost at Denée by the 3ème Compagnie sixteen of their crews were killed; twenty-five men were taken prisoner, sixteen of them wounded. Only three crew members, Sous Lieutenant de Dufourcq, Caporal Chef Briand and Caporal Chef Bessou, all from the Belfort II, succeeded in rejoining the French forces. By 6.00 p.m., after General Bruneau had ordered his shattered Bataillons de Chars to withdraw to the Beaumont area, only some twenty Renaults remained serviceable with the 37ème BCC and 28ème BCC.

For the French armoured division May 15 was a costly defeat, but although some sixty-five tanks — about forty Renault B1 bis and twenty-five Hotchkiss H 39 — had been lost in the sector, the price demanded of the German attackers had also proved costly with between thirty to forty panzers destroyed, the majority from Panzer-Regiment 31.

For his part in saving the day for the II. Bataillon of Infanterie-Regiment 28 at Denée, Major Friedrich Filzinger was awarded with the Ritterkreuz from Hitler's own hands on

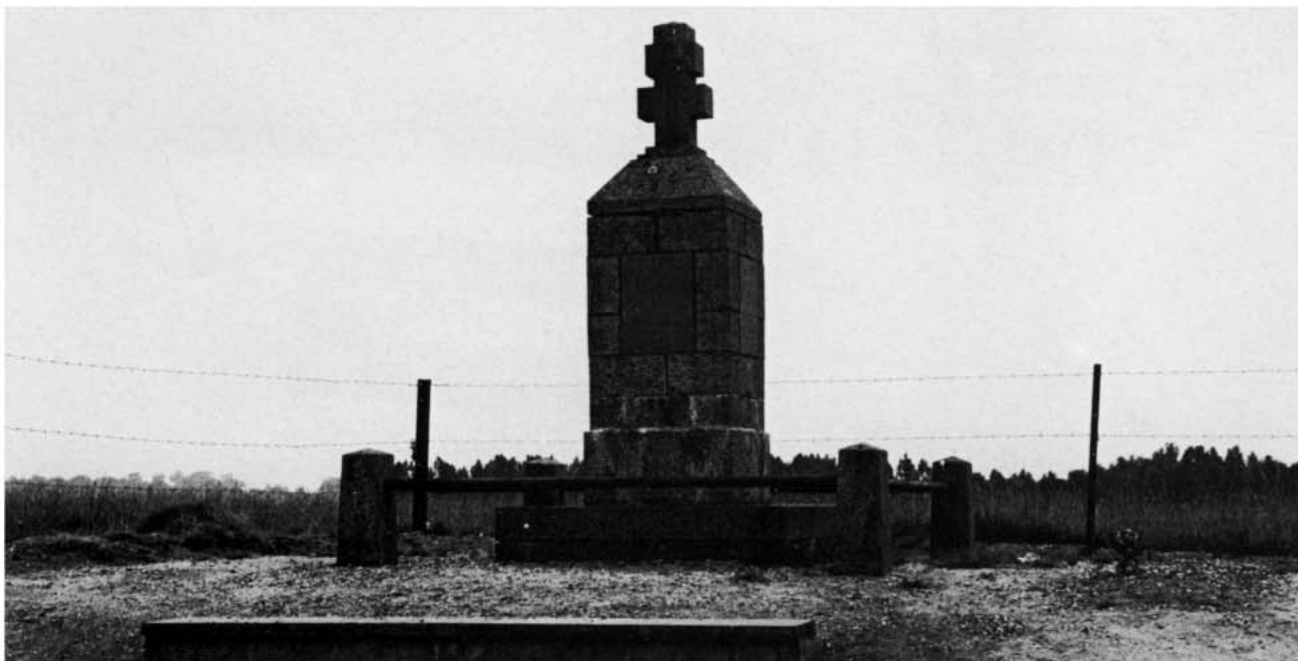


The grave of just one of the German infantrymen killed at Denée. (ECP Armées)

June 5, 1940. Capitaine Jacques Lehoux, who commanded the 3ème Compagnie of the 37ème BCC, had been killed when his tank



Poitou II had exploded at Denée and he was posthumously made a Knight of the Légion d'Honneur on October 12, 1943.



This memorial just north of the battleground lists the names of 24 Frenchmen who 'fell for France and Belgium' on May 15, 1940.



A LA MÉMOIRE
DES EQUIPAGES DE CHARS
MORTS AU COMBAT
DEPUIS LA GRANDE GUERRE